THE WIDOW'S NECKLACE

ERNEST DAVIES

"Let's go to Europe."

THE WIDOW'S NECKLACE

A NOVEL

BY

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INTRODUCTORY

IT was very hot. Even at ten o'clock in the morning the dining-room of the flat on West Forty-Seventh Street was airless, and the smell of stale coffee lingered unpleasantly in spite of the wide-open window. The table had not been cleared. At one end a dish, stained with the scrapings of scrambled egg, jostled a loaf of bread and some dirty plates. At the other was a Japanese tray of cheap red and black lacquer, upon which two jugs stood in a small puddle of milk. A butter-plate, hastily put down, was tilted up against the edge. The butter was soft, and a greasy streak marked the original outline of the pat. Near the centre of the table, a tall china dish, lined with leaves, held a stump of banana-stalk from which the fruit had been torn.

The room was very small and too heavily furnished. The chairs were upholstered in stamped velvet, somewhat the worse for wear, and the walls were covered with popular engravings elaborately framed in oak and gold. Facing the window was a walnut-wood sideboard, with a plate-glass back flanked by small shelves, each of which held a piece of ornamental pottery—a long-necked cat, a tobacco jar in the form of a monk's head with a pink tonsure, a large Japanese vase, and a base copy of a Sèvres lady in a crinoline.

In one corner was an oak escritoire. There were some open shelves nailed to the wall above it, and the higher ones were crowded with soiled magazines and a few books, untidily pushed together. Upon the lowest stood a gilt clock, such as is found in the bedrooms of old-fashioned French hotels. The gilding was tarnished and fly-blown, and one of the hands was missing. Alongside, an American drum clock ticked noisily.

In an armchair by the window sat Luke Johns, well known to the police and the criminal lawyers of New York as a private inquiry agent of considerable ability. He was wearing a flashy tweed suit, a fancy waistcoat unbuttoned at the top, and felt slippers; and while he read his morning newspaper he was quietly and systematically picking his teeth.

Facing him, Mrs. Luke Johns sat idly, with her hands in her lap. Even at forty she was a pretty woman, of the emaciated type which is now fashionable; but at the moment she was far from looking her best. Her hair was twisted up into a careless knot, her blue and white wrapper was crumpled and had been too often to the laundry, and her small, smartly cut shoes were rubbed through at the toes and trodden over at the heels.

Luke Johns laid down his paper, and for a few minutes looked out of the window while he investigated a difficult place with his toothpick. At length, turning to his wife, he said:

"Janie, if I stay here I'm going to be sick."

She stirred and raised her head, looking at him with thoughtful eyes.

"It's about time for a holiday," she answered. "There's no work on hand, and not likely to be yet."

"That's so. And we've got a thousand dollars in the bank."

"It isn't much. We've had no luck lately."

"We're stale, you and me; and that's a fact."

"Perhaps we are. I don't seem able to think, even if anything did come along."

"I've got an idea. Don't shriek!"

"What is it?"

"Let's go to Europe."

Mrs. Johns shot a surprised glance at him. Then she laughed.

"Well, why not?" she said. "We ought to go some time."

"We'll go now."

"Can we manage on a thousand dollars?"

"Yes. There are other places to stay besides the Ritz."

"My! It would be good."

"You're on?"

She nodded.

"Then I'll go down to the steamship office. Can you start to-morrow?"

"Ye-es. I'll want a few things."

"Come with me. We'll fix it right now."

He sprang up and took her affectionately by the arm, adding:

"We'll have a look at Europe. Perhaps it'll change the luck for us when we come back. Anyway, it couldn't be worse than lately."

"Perhaps it will. I don't care; we'll risk it. We've chanced more than this before now, haven't we?"

"Guess we have. Come on, and don't worry about things, Janie. We always snatch the dollars out of some one when we want 'em bad enough."

BOOK I

JEST

CHAPTER I

"HAVE you got the clocks?" Hilda Carew whispered.

Ethel Vawdrey nodded.

"Where are they?"

"In my room—twelve of them."

It was the after-tea hour at Gains. The men had drifted away to the billiard-room, with the exception of Arthur Drury, who was sitting beside Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, talking to her in a low tone. Her pretty, made-up face, with its tip-tilted, impertinent nose and its coronet of auburn hair, wore an expression of satisfied proprietorship. She liked Drury, and she did not find his attentions less pleasing because he was her junior by some years.

Mrs. Vawdrey was laying out the cards for her daily game of patience; and Lady Benyon was pretending to be interested, while she yawned behind her fan, and reflected on the dulness of country houses. She did not like dulness any more than she liked patience; and the hours between five and seven were always difficult to fill.

Ethel Vawdrey, in a velvet tea-gown of the latest fashion, was smoking a cigarette and turning over the pages of *The Sketch*. She was a very pretty girl of two and twenty, with a marvelous complexion and a slight, lissome figure. She would have been pretty in rags, and with the unlimited

allowance of a millionaire's only child she deserved her reputation for positive loveliness. The lace sleeve falling back and the supple gold bracelet hanging loosely on her wrist undoubtedly enhanced the beauty of her arm as it rested on the back of the sofa.

To the eye Hilda Carew was less attractive, though she was by no means plain. She was tall and sturdily built, of the open-air type which looks its best in country clothes. Her hands and feet were large and well shaped; her waist suggested healthy development rather than elegance, and her wide brow and clear blue eyes would not have inspired a passionate sonnet, though they might have made a man fall in love with her. She was known as a good comrade, level-headed, and useful in an emergency. Leslie Fraser's sarcastic tongue had once summed her up as an excellent wife for a country squire who had broad acres and wanted broad children.

"Twelve!" she whispered. "How splendid! I suppose the shopman thought you were quite mad?"

"I told him the servants couldn't wake, and I wanted one for each of them. He looked perfectly incredulous, and asked: 'An' ye have twelve servants?' I said we had ever so many more than that, only some of them slept together."

"Excellent! It will be all over Stilkirk."

"Sure to be. But we already have such a reputation for extravagance that it can't add much to it."

"Let's go up and see them."

"Come along, then."

They crossed the hall, and went up the great staircase to Ethel's boudoir. The room was filled with the sound of ticking, and on a table there were twelve American alarm clocks, looking aggressively new and cheap in their shiny tin cases.

"Oh!" cried Hilda delightedly, as she took one up. "Aren't they lovely!"

"Gorgeous! It really *was* a heavenly idea of yours."

"Yes, I think they will avenge the apple-pie beds. Willie will be in a very contrite mood tomorrow morning."

"He'll be very cross. He simply won't sleep a wink."

"I wouldn't promise that—with him."

"But, my dear—why, they would rouse the seven sleepers!"

"Maudie declares she hears him snoring through the wall; and if that's true, he'll simply snore down the noise of these. Have you tried one?"

"They let one off in the shop. It was awful. I said I wanted them extra loud."

"Let's do one now. How do they work?"

"You have to set the dial. Let me."

Ethel took the clock and turned the alarm hand to five minutes past six. In a moment the ticking of the twelve clocks was drowned in a discordant metallic buzzing, which continued for thirty

seconds, and died away in a series of gurglin clicks. The two girls burst out laughing.

"Perfectly heavenly!" Hilda cried. "I do wis we could see him when they go off."

"That's the drawback. We shall miss the be of the fun."

"Maudie must keep awake; she'll be able hear him raging. Let's get her up here."

"Oh, she's talking to Arthur Drury. Bett not disturb them."

"I suppose it's a case with him. Do you thir she's interested?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I shouldn't think s I always find him rather tiresome."

"He's so conceited, isn't he?"

"He wants well snubbing."

There was a moment's pause. Then Hilda sai

"Oh, but, Ethel—won't Willie hear this awf ticking? I don't mean when he's asleep, but wh he goes to bed."

"I thought of that. The shopman said, if t clocks were wrapped up in a cloth, with the alar sticking out, it would be all right."

"Then, let's do it. What shall we wra them in?"

"Dusters, I should think. I'll ring."

"I'll cover them up with this paper. We don want the maid to see them."

Two dozen clean dusters were ordered and pr duced, and the girls began to swathe each clock thick folds.

"We must set them first," Hilda said.

"Yes. Let's see—what time shall we put the first at?"

"Two o'clock, and then every hour."

"That's two, three, four, five, six, and seven."

"And the grand slam at seven; there'll be seven at once. I'm sure he won't go to sleep again after that."

They burst out laughing again at the thought of Willie Pfeiffer roused by the simultaneous clanging of seven American alarm clocks from the deep sleep which he was supposed to enjoy. The legend had grown from a protest made by Mrs. Dayrell-Wing who occupied the room next to his at Gains. She had accused him of snoring so loudly that she was kept awake, and since then the party had teased him without mercy. At dinner, whatever subject was started, the conversation invariably came round to Willie Pfeiffer in bed; and since Vawdrey had gravely asked him, apropos of some new novel, whether he had ever read the story of Rip Van Winkle, he was always addressed as Rip. It was the useful joke, without which no house-party is completely at ease; and, in a way well known to pantomime comedians, repetition increased its popularity.

Like a musical theme, it lent itself to a great variety of treatment. At tea-time on the previous day, the butler had brought in a neat chemist's parcel addressed to Pfeiffer. On being opened, it was found to contain a small box labelled "Vinolia

Pills (Violet flavor). A certain cure for sleepiness. To be administered as required."

Pfeiffer, attributing this attention to Hilda Carew, resolved upon a revenge; and, with Drury's help, he made apple-pie beds for the two girls. The clocks were the answer to this indignity.

"Now, have we got them all right?" Ethel asked.

"Yes. Two, three, four, five, six; and seven for seven o'clock," Hilda answered, checking them off.

"Then we'd better roll them up in the dusters, and they'll be ready for after dinner."

"Mind you leave the alarms sticking out."

"Rather—like that."

"Yes."

"You can still hear the ticking."

"Only just. He won't notice it."

"I don't think so."

"Well, let's go down. They may suspect something if we keep out of the way."

"It's almost dressing-time, isn't it?"

"There's half an hour yet. We'll go and show ourselves in the billiard-room."

In the evening, while the men were still in the dining-room, finishing a bottle of Mr. Vawdrey's excellent port, Ethel and Hilda ran upstairs and fetched the clocks. They went into Pfeiffer's room and distributed them in various hiding-places. One was put in the wardrobe, the door being left ajar; another in the clothes basket, two more

under the chest of drawers, one in the boot-cupboard, and the grand slam under the bed.

"Bon soir, monsieur," Ethel said, with a deep curtsey toward the empty bed, as they left the room.

CHAPTER II

THE old house at Gains used to possess an historic and antiquarian interest inferior to none in Scotland; but, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, it had been burnt to the ground, and the Fraser of that day rebuilt it as a comfortable dwelling-house of the period, without attempting to reproduce its original design. Its appearance, therefore, was scarcely in harmony with the wild moorland country. Its neat Georgian elevation was almost townish; and, if it harbored a ghost, it was certainly one in a velvet suit and buckled shoes. The furniture, too, carried one no further back than the days of card-playing and duelling and of those polite manners which industrialism has taken from us. It belonged to the age of mahogany, and tall silver candlesticks, and immense wine-coolers—the age of port and of uncustomed French brandy in convenient wooden kegs.

The house was stone-built and flat-fronted, with a wing running back at right angles to the main structure. The entrance door in the centre of the south frontage opened into the great hall, and on either side of the door there were seven tall windows. Above was a stately range of fifteen windows corresponding with those below; and, above again, fifteen dormer windows behind a brick

coping completed the mathematical elevation which bears witness in every town in England to the popularity of Wren and his followers.

The estate of Gains had belonged to the Frasers for more than six centuries before it passed to Leslie Fraser, the present representative of the family. Port and card-playing had proved costly amusements, and the family fortunes had waned grievously since the time when Fraser of Gains had entertained James V and had led a thousand men in his defence. So, when Leslie Fraser inherited the property from his father, he found that the revenue was barely sufficient to pay interest on the mortgages.

He had no profession, and in addition to the necessity of maintaining himself in the state of comfort to which he was accustomed, he had to provide a substantial allowance for his mother, who, for some years previously, had lived in London.

On learning how greatly the estate was impoverished, she declared with tears in her eyes that she would cut down expenses and "manage" on eight hundred a year; but as she was a very bad bridge player, and played seven nights in the week, Leslie interpreted her statements as a pious prayer to fortune rather than as a fact upon which he could rely. He knew, indeed, that the last mortgage upon Gains had been raised within a few months of his father's death, to meet the losses of

some "terribly unlucky evenings"; and such history is most apt to repeat itself.

Consultations with the family lawyer left him with the choice between marrying an heiress and selling Gains. For some days he balanced the disadvantages, and carefully considered the girls of his acquaintance who were reported to have more than a hundred thousand pounds. But he could find none with whom he could imagine himself living happily for a lifetime; and being, at eight and twenty, far more at home in an armchair at his club than in a stone house on a moor, he chose the less disagreeable alternative and put Gains on the market.

As in the case of Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, the ideal purchaser was not long in coming forward; and Tom Vawdrey was so obviously ideal that the matter was settled, and the deposit paid, within a fortnight. Any one who cares to look him up in *Who's Who* will find him thus described:

"Vawdrey, Thomas, of Shrotton, Yorks., and South Audley Street, London. Ironmaster. Chairman of the Shrotton Coal & Iron Co., Ltd., and owner of various large interests in the Yorkshire coalfields. Born, 3 July, 1854. Educated, Leeds Grammar School. Married, 21 May, 1887, Mary, daughter of Francis Kay, of London. Clubs, Reform and Garrick. Recreations, shooting and fishing."

He was one of Fortune's favorites. His father

had worked for wages all his life, but with the development of the Shrotton coalfield the son's chance came, and he grasped it firmly in his strong Yorkshire hands. At thirty he was a rich man; at fifty he was more than a millionaire; and, more remarkable still, he had made his money without incurring envy or losing a friend. He was as popular among the class from which he had sprung as among the extravagant, easy-going set in which he now moved. Indeed, there was something lovable in him which few could resist: he was so cheerful, so free from cares, so intent on having a good time, and so anxious that every one else should have one.

In business he was scrupulously fair. He liked money, and spent it lavishly; but he never drove an unconscionable bargain, and he never tried to get the better of his workmen. At one time there had been trouble at the Shrotton pits, and a strike was declared. It was midwinter, and the men were ill-provided with money, so that within a week many families were threatened with starvation. Vawdrey could easily have whipped them back to work under pressure of hunger, but he disregarded his manager's advice and took a different line. He telegraphed to Leeds, and had a complete camp equipment set up near the pit-heads. Then he interviewed the men's leaders.

"Now, boys," he said, "there's breakfast, dinner, and tea for every woman and child as long as the strike lasts. That'll set you free from thinking

about them, and we can discuss this thing on level terms. Send in a deputation to-morrow morning, and we'll try and settle it."

Terms were soon agreed, and one of the leaders said of him afterwards: "He's a dirty capitalist, but, all the same, he treats you like a man." Probably that was the secret of his success. He treated every one like a man until he caught him cheating. Then he made himself extraordinarily unpleasant.

CHAPTER III

AT Gains the girls of the party usually came down to breakfast before the men, and on the morning after the episode of the clocks Ethel and Hilda were exceptionally early. They had agreed that Willie Pfeiffer could not possibly go to sleep again after the grand slam at seven o'clock, and they did not mean to miss his entry into the dining-room.

But the time went on and he did not appear. At nine o'clock the door opened and they looked up expectant; but it was only Mrs. Dayrell-Wing.

"Good morning," Ethel said.

"Good morning," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing answered, in a very curt voice.

Then she added vindictively: "Oh, you wretched girls!"

"Why, what's the matter?" Hilda asked.

"I simply haven't slept a wink. Why didn't I stop you, or ask for another room? I'm just worn out."

"The clocks!" Ethel exclaimed. "Oh, I *am* sorry. I never thought you'd hear them through the wall."

"There's a door between, you know," Hilda reminded her.

"But it's got a thick curtain over it. Do you mean to say you heard them all? Or was it only the seven o'clock reveille?"

"My dear, I heard every single one of them. I was strongly tempted to knock up Mr. Pfeiffer and tell him there were a dozen of them, and that he'd better find them and throw them out of the window. But I hate to spoil sport."

They all laughed, and Ethel said:

"You poor thing! I feel perfectly abject about it."

"I wouldn't have minded so much," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing complained, "only it's my belief that the wretch slept through it."

"Didn't you hear him moving about?"

"I didn't hear a sound, except those miserable alarms. And then, loud snores."

"Impossible! They must have woke him."

"I'm certain they didn't. At seven, when they all went off together, I heard a movement—as if he was turning over in bed."

"Hush! Here's some one coming."

It was Arthur Drury; but a few minutes later Willie Pfeiffer appeared. He looked fresh and healthy, as he always did, and showed no signs of a sleepless night. His black hair was brushed smoothly back, his little moustache was carefully trimmed and brilliantined, and his eyes were clear and bright. The girls stared at him in fascinated amazement.

His first glance was, as ever, at Ethel. And she replied to it by wishing him good morning and asking how he had slept.

"A 1, thanks. I defy any one to keep awake in

Scotland after midnight. Hope I didn't snore, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing?"

"Oh—er—not more than usual," she answered.

"By Jove!" he said. "You don't mean to say that joke's wearing thin at last? It's only been running since Tuesday."

"My good man," she answered, with sudden energy, "if you slept in the next room to yourself you'd find there wasn't any joke about it."

"Architectural problem," said Drury, as he began on the cold grouse. "Can you sleep in the next room to yourself?"

"My problem is how to sleep in the next room to Mr. Pfeiffer."

"This is too brilliant for me," Pfeiffer declared. "My brain's a bit sluggish in the morning. Please, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, please drop your rapier until after lunch."

"It's a shame to tease Rip," Drury said. "Let him eat his porridge."

"Yes. Live and let live, that's what *I* say," Pfeiffer put in.

"Sleep and let sleep—I wish you'd say that instead," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing retorted.

Pfeiffer laid down his spoon and glanced round the table with imploring eyes.

"She won't leave me alone," he wailed. "Miss Vawdrey, please draw her fire while I eat a morsel. Really, you know, I'm hungry."

"He shall, he shall," Ethel answered, with dancing, smiling eyes.

Hilda, who could not believe that he had not heard the alarms, had been watching him suspiciously. She guessed that he meant to disappoint them by pretending that he had slept as soundly as usual, and she was not going to resign herself to that without a struggle.

"*I* couldn't sleep last night," she said, raising her voice a little to attract attention. "I think it must have been something at dinner, for I so seldom lie awake. Didn't you feel it, Mr. Pfeiffer?"

"I? Not a bit," he answered openly.

"Do you mean that you slept right on till you were called?" she pressed.

"Well, almost. I woke once—about seven; some one was ringing a bell like mad. I thought it was the telephone in my chambers, till I remembered where I was."

Then, catching the expression of mingled incredulity and disappointment on her face, and glancing quickly at Mrs. Dayrell-Wing and at Ethel, light broke upon him. They had been trying a practical joke on him! Some foolery with an electric bell!

"You've been up to something," he cried. "The old joke with a new face on it. I thought it couldn't have died so easily. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Hilda answered, as the three of them broke into a peal of laughter.

"Nothing?" Pfeiffer cried. "Come, now, that won't wash. You've been fooling with the bells, trying to wake me up."

"Nothing, really nothing," Ethel gasped.

"Now I come to think of it," Pfeiffer went on, "I found something uncommonly odd in my boot cupboard this morning. I thought at first it was part of the wash, but when I pulled it out it was a clock wrapped up in a cloth. And I found another just like it in the wardrobe, hung up among my coats."

"Any more?" Hilda asked. The laughter had become almost hysterical.

"Any more? You don't mean to say there were any more?"

"Only a few."

With a gesture of despair Pfeiffer turned to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing.

"Did you have a hand in this?" he asked.

"A hand in what?"

"In this clock joke. I suppose it *was* a joke, wasn't it? You all seem frightfully amused."

"I wasn't a bit amused, I can assure you. I seem to have been the only person who heard the abominable things."

"Well, I'm awfully sorry I didn't do what was expected of me. I'd have kept awake if I'd known."

"You couldn't," Ethel dared.

"I don't believe you could," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said with judicial precision. "Any one who can sleep through five American alarms, and think it was the telephone when seven more go off together in his ear, cannot have any self-control whatever."

Before Pfeiffer could retort, Sir Charles Benyon sauntered in.

"Mornin'," he said. "You're all very early this mornin'."

"Yes," said Drury, "there's been a joke. Pfeiffer's been caught napping."

"In the act?"

"In the act—red-handed—*flagrante delicto.*"

Sir Charles unfolded his napkin and put up his eyeglass, saying in the slow, drawling voice he affected:

"Very sad. Sorry for you, Willie. Comes of not obeyin' doctor's orders. Why did you forget your Vinolia pill?"

Pfeiffer thumped his fist on the table.

"If you people," he protested, "can't get a new joke by this evening, I swear I'll leave the house."

Fraser, coming into the room, caught only the last words.

"Why will you leave the house?" he asked.

"To retrieve his reputation," Sir Charles said. "Canada, and that sort of thing, you know. A new life in a new country."

"What have you been doing, Willie?" Fraser asked.

"I've committed the regrettable crime of disappointing Miss Vawdrey. She never told me I had to wake up when the bell rang, so of course I didn't. And that spoiled the joke."

"You haven't spoiled the joke," Ethel laughed. "You've made it ever so much better."

"If I may advise you," Drury said to her, "I suggest a cartridge with a time-fuse for to-night."

CHAPTER IV

SOON after breakfast the men went out shooting. Pfeiffer, who was usually the best shot of the party, seemed preoccupied, and found himself missing every other bird; and when they returned to the house he was silent and took little part in the conversation. Later, in the billiard-room, he drew Fraser and Drury aside, saying:

"Look here, what are we going to do to wipe out the memory of the clocks? I've been racking my brain all day about it."

"H'm," said Drury, "it's difficult. We can't do apple-pie beds again."

"Of course not. We've got to find something absolutely fresh and unexpected. Those clocks were a damned clever idea, and I was a perfect idiot not to spot them."

"Didn't you really hear them?" Fraser asked.

"Not a blessed one, except the last lot; and then I didn't think anything of it. I suppose I do sleep pretty sound when I'm fairly off."

"You'll never hear the last of it," Drury said, laughing.

"Unless we can wipe it out by a better retort. We simply must. I've been hatching out an elaborate post-office hoax, with telegrams and so on. But there isn't much in it."

"There are booby traps," Fraser suggested.

"Oh, they're rotten—pillows on top of your head and all that. Besides, girls hate having their hair rumpled."

"Can't you suggest anything?" Fraser asked, turning to Drury.

"Hanged if I can."

"Couldn't we work a telegram—'All is discovered, fly at once'—that sort of thing?"

"There's nothing in it," Pfeiffer reiterated with some impatience. "I thought of that. We want something new."

Drury, staring into the grate, with his hands in his pockets, suddenly looked up, saying:

"Let's hide Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace."

Pfeiffer heaved a sigh of relief.

"Good man!" he cried. "That's brilliant."

"Brilliants, you mean," Drury returned, with a grin. "And devilish expensive ones, too."

"What's it worth?" Fraser asked.

"Twenty thou. My firm has insured it for that."

"In that case, you'd better do the hiding," Pfeiffer said. "Then you won't have any nervous qualms. It might spoil your dinner if it didn't turn up when it's wanted."

"Oh, I shouldn't worry unduly. We've laid off all the risk except a thousand."

"Gad! We shall hear her screams for miles when she find it's gone," Pfeiffer said, rubbing his hands. "When shall we do it? It ought to be before dinner."

"There's plenty of time," Fraser answered, look-

ing at his watch. "It's not half past six yet."

"Good. We'll hide it now," Pfeiffer said. "And about eight o'clock, when she goes to put it on, the fun will begin. We can keep it up till nearly nine, even if it does spoil the dinner."

"It'll rather miss fire if she doesn't mean to wear it to-night," Drury suggested.

"Oh, she always does."

"Where does she keep it?" Fraser asked.

"Don't know," Drury answered. "We shall have to get hold of her maid and take her into partnership."

"Well, you two run up and do it," Pfeiffer said. "I'll stay here in case any of them come in and ask questions."

"What are you fellows whispering about?" Vawdrey asked, coming toward them with a cue in his hand. He had just finished a game with Sir Charles.

"Oh, nothing," Pfeiffer answered blandly.

"There's some mischief afoot, I'm sure. We'd better be in it—eh, Benyon?"

"No, this is a juvenile comedy; there's no room for you. You've got to play the heavy father, with a clean handkerchief and a white beard. Benyon can be the wicked baronet; he doesn't want any make-up for that."

"Willie, if you make me an apple-pie bed, I'll drag you out in your pyjamas, and make you apologize on your knees," Vawdrey said severely.

"You're quite safe. By the laws of drama the

heavy father is sacred from molestation—except at the hands of the wicked baronet. You ought to know that."

"I don't want to be the heavy father. I never could snivel. If I can't be the hero, I'll be the lady's friend, *à la* Wyndham, and hold her hand. So just tell me what it's all about."

"No, no, no!" Pfeiffer cried. "Run off, you fellows; I'll keep Mr. Vawdrey in play."

He caught Vawdrey by the lappets of his coat, and they engaged in a friendly struggle while Drury and Fraser escaped from the room.

To avoid attention, they went by the back-stairs, and picked up Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's maid on the way. Drury whispered to Fraser:

"What shall I give her—a kiss or a sovereign?"

"Sovereign's best, and comes cheaper in the end."

The maid, a quick-witted, laughter-loving French girl, entered into the joke at once. She took them into Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room and showed them the small, flat jewel-case in which the necklace lay by itself on one shelf of the dressing-table. It was not locked, for in London all the jewelry was kept together in a safe, and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was wise enough to know that a lock is no protection to the thin, leather-covered boxes which have to be used when travelling.

Drury pressed the spring, and the lid flew open.

"Ripping, isn't it!" he said, as the light flashed upon it.

"Take it out," Fraser said quietly.

"By Jove! It's worth bagging. With that in your pocket—and what ho! for the Continong."

They looked at each other and smiled. Then, turning to the maid, Drury added:

"Thank you, mademoiselle. You can now leave us while we make the necklace disappear. When madame asks for it this evening, ask her where she has put it, with appropriate gestures of surprise and horror."

"Oui, monsieur. Je comprends parfaitement."

"Monsieur Fraser and I will miss that part of the play, which I am sure you will do excellently. Then you must ring the bell as hard as you can, and cry out, and we shall rush in—do you see?"

"Oui, monsieur."

"That's all right, then."

She went out and closed the door, but the two men did not move. They were looking at the necklace, feasting their eyes upon it as it hung on Drury's hand—a miniature river of ice and fire. They stood there for a full minute, until Fraser broke the spell by saying suddenly and rather curtly:

"Where's it to go?"

"Under the pillow," Drury answered, with a glance round the room.

He put the necklace back in its case, and went toward the bed, the head of which was against the inner wall, facing the windows. He carefully turned back the sheet, and pushed the case between

the pillow and the bolster. Then, opening the door, he tiptoed along the corridor followed by Fraser.

Pfeiffer was still in the billiard-room.

"All right?" he asked, as they entered.

Drury nodded.

"Where is it?"

"Under the pillow."

"Good."

Vawdrey and Sir Charles had begun another game, and the others did not stay long. Fraser went to his room, to write to his mother, who, at Dinard, had suffered a new series of "terribly unlucky evenings." Drury, also, had arrears of correspondence on his mind, and Pfeiffer went to the gun-room. It was agreed that they should dress early and meet in the hall at eight o'clock.

CHAPTER V

THE dinner-hour at Gains was nominally a quarter past eight, but no one was ever punctual, and Gibson usually allowed them ten minutes' grace. So, when Fraser came slowly down the staircase as the clock was striking eight, only Pfeiffer and Drury were in the hall. He strolled up and joined them in front of the fire. He looked tired, and rather worried, as if his letter to his mother had not been an easy one to write.

Neither Drury nor Pfeiffer said anything. The house was unusually silent, for every one was dressing, and the servants were busy in their quarters with the preparations for dinner. Outside a dog began to bark, and footsteps approached, crunching the gravel, and died away again. Then a door banged, leaving the silence more noticeable than before.

A feeling of suspense and discomfort settled upon the conspirators. Drury was seized with nervousness, beginning to fear that Mrs. Dayrell-Wing might take the joke amiss and be offended. He wished he had not suggested it; jokes were always dangerous, and one never knew how a woman was going to look at them. And with things as they were between them it was idiotic to run risks.

Pfeiffer, too, in the period of waiting, grew

somewhat apprehensive. He did not know Mrs. Dayrell-Wing very intimately, and it would be tiresome if she got angry at being hoaxed. The thing did not look quite so funny as when Drury had first proposed it. Still, it had to be carried through now. He glanced at his watch, and shut it with a snap.

"I feel like Guy Fawkes," he said.

Fraser smiled, but made no reply.

Suddenly a bell rang—a loud, long, excited peal.

"That's it," Fraser said. "Now for mademoiselle's scream and we'll rush up."

They waited, but the scream did not come. Instead, they heard the sound of a door opening and a murmur of voices which ceased almost immediately.

"She's forgotten her part," Drury said.

In a moment Gibson, the portly butler, appeared at the end of the hall and came toward the foot of the stairs. He was the only one of the servants who claimed the privilege of using the main staircase.

"What's up, Gibson?" Pfeiffer asked.

"Mrs. Dayrell-Wing wishes to see the master, sir."

"What for?"

"She did not say, sir," Gibson answered, in a tone of grave reproval.

He moved on, and the three men exchanged doubtful glances.

"Shall we go up?" Pfeiffer asked.

"Better wait," Drury answered. "We shall hear something in a moment."

They heard Gibson knock, and presently Vawdrey was seen going toward Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room. Hilda Carew, on her way down, halted at the top of the stairs, and then walked on to see what was the matter. The Benyons, too, gave way to curiosity and followed her.

"Come on," Pfeiffer said. "We mustn't miss any more."

As they expected, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's door was open, and a good deal of eager conversation was going on in the room. Sir Charles, with eyeglass fixed, was standing impassive on the threshold.

"What's up?" Pfeiffer inquired, with successful carelessness.

Sir Charles turned slowly toward him and stared, as he always did when asked a sudden question.

"Burglars," he said, after his usual period of deliberation. "They've got the necklace."

Pfeiffer whistled, and pushed past him into the room. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, glancing swiftly from one to another with anxious wide-open eyes, was saying for the tenth time that she kept it in the case on her dressing-table, and had put it there last night.

"Yes, yes, I know," Vawdrey said, rather impatiently. "But either you or your maid must have moved it. Look in the cupboards and places."

"I declare I haven't, and I've asked Céleste, too. Ask her yourself if you don't believe me. I tell you it's gone."

Vawdrey was about to reply, when he caught sight of the newcomers, and an idea flashed into his mind. He drew Pfeiffer aside, while Mrs. Dayrell-Wing buttonholed Arthur Drury and began her story afresh, showing a strong inclination to burst into tears on his shoulder.

"Willie, this is some of your deviltry, I suppose?" Vawdrey whispered. "If you think I'm going to play heavy father in this act you're mistaken."

"Don't give it away," Pfeiffer pleaded. "It'll be found before we sit down to dinner."

"Yes, by Jove, I'll see to that. I'll give you ten minutes' run before I expose you."

"Oh, more than that—please."

"Not a second. I hate waiting for dinner."

"All right. We'll have a hot search for ten minutes. Give me a wink when time's up."

He turned to the others, saying in a loud voice:

"It can't really be lost. Let's all search the room. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, have we your permission to pry into the mysteries?"

"You may turn the room upside down, if only you'll find it. But I know you won't. Mr. Vawdrey, I wish you'd send for the police."

Ethel, who had just come in, joined Lady Benyon and Hilda in examining the wardrobe, while Céleste hovered round them, making voluble comments in French.

"Don't look in the bottom drawer," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing screamed. "There's a new frock, and you're not to see it."

The men, with the exception of Vawdrey—who stood with his watch in his hand—occupied themselves in shaking the curtains, peering under the furniture, and opening the drawers of the writing table. At first, Fraser and Drury were rather lethargic; but, urged on by Pfeiffer, they warmed to the sport. Soon they were moving all the furniture into the middle of the room, in case, as they explained, the necklace should have slipped behind anything.

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing watched their efforts with angry scorn in her eyes. In spite of the fact that they were obviously struggling with suppressed merriment, the idea of a practical joke had not yet entered her mind.

"I suppose," she said viciously, "you men think I'm an absolute idiot. It's just likely that a sane woman would put a diamond necklace under the bed, isn't it?"

Pfeiffer, lying prone on the floor, to watch for any clue which the moving of the bed might reveal, buried his face in the thick carpet and wrestled for self-control.

"There's nothing here but these," he said, holding up a pair of very elegant bedroom slippers.

Vawdrey grinned, saying:

"They're something we haven't seen before, anyway."

The girls, who had finished ransacking the ward-

robe, stood wondering what was to be done next. They did not suspect a hoax, and the thought of a burglar's visit frightened them.

"Father, won't you let the police know?" Ethel asked. "The man may still be in the neighborhood."

"I shall in a few minutes," he answered, pitching his words at Pfeiffer.

At that moment the gong sounded for dinner.

"Ring for Gibson, my dear," Mrs. Vawdrey said. "We can't go down just yet. And we'd better have the maids up and question them; they may have moved it when they dusted."

Vawdrey rang, and presently Gibson's broad figure filled the doorway. He did not know why every one was congregated in Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room, and, even if he had known, he would not have held dinner back without the most explicit instructions. He lived in a madcap household, and if it should ever arrive that the dinner hour was to be liable to variation without due notice the last and chief anchorage of his orderly mind would be gone.

"You rang, sir?" he asked.

"Yes. Send the housemaids up here."

"Yes, sir. Dinner is served, sir."

"I know it is; we shall be down directly."

"Don't talk of dinner," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing cried. "I sha'n't move from this room till the police come. It's perfectly heartless of you to think of eating when I'm in such distress."

"It is indeed—simply heroic," Pfeiffer chimed in, with a show of indignation.

"Gallioic, don't you mean?" Fraser murmured.

Pfeiffer ignored the amendment, and said to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing:

"But you are insured, aren't you?"

"Yes, thanks to Mr. Drury. But I shall hate taking the money from him. I never thought I should have to or I wouldn't have done it."

"My dear old boy," Pfeiffer said, drawing a long face at Drury, "this is a nasty knock for you."

The housemaids now appeared, hovering at the door, and in answer to the same or similar questions repeated a dozen times, they declared that the jewel-case had been on the dressing-table that morning, and that they had not touched it. Then they withdrew, to stir the servants' hall with the story of the robbery.

Vawdrey, hungry after his day's shooting, decided to cut short the last act of the comedy.

"Now," he said, moving toward Pfeiffer, "in two minutes I'm going down to dinner. Have you fellows looked everywhere?"

"Afraid we have—at least everywhere except the bed. It might have been put there."

"Who by, I should like to know?" Mrs. Dayrell-Wing demanded with quick fury.

"Well, don't you ever sleep with it under your pillow? I should have thought a valuable thing like that——"

"Never."

"Anyway, there's a lump of some sort here," he said, thumping the pillow.

He thrust his hand in and drew out the jewel-case. There was a moment of gasping silence. Then Mrs. Dayrell-Wing cried:

"You wretch! You put it there. I know you did."

Pfeiffer maintained his grave expression.

"Joy never kills," he said. "But temporarily it has been known to cause hallucinations. Very sad."

"You're a graceless hooligan," she went on, half laughing and half angry, as she took the case from Pfeiffer. "I'll never speak to you again."

"Perfectly monstrous," Ethel joined in, holding herself very erect.

"*Et tu*—Beauty?" the irrepressible Pfeiffer asked.

Then every one laughed, and Ethel colored up and looked prettier than ever. Her flirtation with Willie Pfeiffer had been serious enough to give a new point to the old quip.

"Come along now. Dinner's waiting," Vawdrey cut in. "Let's all kiss and be friends, or we sha'n't get any food to-night."

"By all means," Pfeiffer cried. "I love kissing and being friends. Where do I begin?"

Vawdrey caught him by the elbows and ran him out of the room, singing: "Fall in and follow me." The others crowded behind them, and in a minute they were all eating the rather tepid soup which had been waiting for them.

CHAPTER VI

VAWDREY, who was rather particular about his food, laid down his spoon, saying:

"Willie, like Augustus, has let our soup get cold."

"'And on the fifth day he was dead,' Hilda quoted. "Poetic justice."

"I don't think so; it was probably the cook's fault. He said the soup was nasty."

"If glances could kill," Pfeiffer complained, "I could not hope for even four more days in the sunshine of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's society."

"Are you speaking to me?" Mrs. Dayrell-Wing asked. "If so, pray don't imagine that I would honor you with a glance even for the purpose of removing you from my path."

"Have you a path? I thought one so lovely could only dwell among the untrodden ways."

"Yes. Four doors from Grosvenor Square," she answered crisply.

"What a change from Shepherd's Bush!"

To Gibson's extreme annoyance, the second footman sniggered. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing appealed to the table with outstretched arms.

"Now, do I look as if I came from Shepherd's Bush?" she demanded.

"It must have been in the pre-necklace period," Vawdrey said. "Before the stone age, in fact."

Pfeiffer bent toward her with a smile, saying:

"Of course. Now you mention it, I remember you perfectly. It was about B.C. a million, at a cave-warming close to the White City. You were wearing a very fetching rabbit skin, with a distinctly Frenchy cut about it."

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing tried not to laugh. She was really a good deal annoyed with Pfeiffer for frightening her about her necklace, and she would have liked to snub him into a proper state of contrition. But it was impossible to stand aloof when the table was rocking with merriment, and after a momentary struggle she gave way.

"You'd better not describe any more," Lady Benyon said to Pfeiffer.

"Oh, there wasn't any more," he answered.

The second footman ruined his prospects forever by making a sudden dash for the door.

Mrs. Vawdrey, who preserved an unfashionable capacity for being shocked, thought that Willie Pfeiffer had "gone too far." And, with a view to closing the subject, she summed it up with the remark:

"I'm sure dear Mrs. Dayrell-Wing would look charming whatever she wore."

When the ladies had left the room the subject of the necklace again came uppermost.

"I say, Drury," Vawdrey said, "you'd have

looked a bit green if you hadn't been in the plot—eh?"

"Well, rather. It would have been a nasty quarter of an hour."

"But you don't stand to lose the whole amount, do you?"

"Good Lord, no. A risk like that is spread over several firms."

"So it isn't a matter of committing suicide if it goes wrong?" Pfeiffer asked.

"No. But it wouldn't be exactly pleasant."

"I suppose you get big losses sometimes?" Fraser suggested. "Otherwise people wouldn't insure."

"We don't reckon to get many, or we wouldn't do it at the price."

"We had a fire at Shrotton last year," Vawdrey said, "and rather a nice picture which hung over the chimney piece was damaged. I'd given a hundred and twenty guineas for it at the Academy, and I claimed that; and after fussing a bit they paid it."

"Oh, they pay all right, as long as they don't suspect fraud."

The conversation halted, and then swung back again to the necklace, Vawdrey saying:

"Did you ever hear the history of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace? She told me the other day, though I fancy she generally keeps it to herself. There's rather a nasty story hanging to it."

"Oh? What is it?" Pfeiffer asked, as he lighted his cigar.

"It came from Paris. Aren't you smoking, Fraser? Have a small one."

"No, thanks."

Vawdrey pushed his chair back from the table and went on:

"It's some years ago now. At that time Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was living in Melbourne, and her husband used to come to Europe every twelve months or so on business. She generally came with him, but on his last visit something happened to prevent her; and, to make up for it, he determined to take her back a real good present."

"As he ought," Pfeiffer said.

"Well, he looked at all the usual things, but nothing pleased him. Then, one day, he saw an advertisement in the paper of some jewels which were to be sold at the Hotel Dronot, and he went to have a look at them. The necklace caught his eye at once, and after consulting an expert he left it in his hands to buy it for him."

"What did he give for it?"

"I think about half a million francs. There were several buyers after it, and when the business was settled the man congratulated him on having got it; for, he said, it was probably matchless. And then he told him all about it. It had been got together and made up to the order of one of those fabulously rich Brazilians who go to Paris to amuse themselves."

"I know. They're a stock character in French novels from Balzac's 'Henri Montés' onward."

"Well, this one fell very much in love with a lady, and laid violent siege to her. But apparently she didn't like him—or, at all events, she liked some one else better. The Brazilian scattered the greater part of half a dozen jewelers' shops at her lovely feet, but it didn't have the desired effect, and he began to feel that life was a burden."

"Mais il y a d' autres," Fraser murmured.

"Oh, quite so; but his eye was prejudiced. At last he went nap on this necklace, which he ordered specially; and all Europe was ransacked to match the stones and make it the finest thing possible of its kind?"

"And——?"

"That settled it. She consented to make him the happiest man on earth, and for a time she succeeded. But he was a jealous, suspicious sort of cove, and before long he began to suspect that he hadn't got all he bargained for. He set a trap—and she fell into it. There was a royal row—frantic recriminations, tears, curses, and all the rest of it—and it ended in her tearing off the necklace and throwing it on the floor, telling him to take it back and get out of her sight."

"Well?" Pfeiffer asked, keenly interested.

"He turned livid, for he was desperately fond of her; but for a moment he did not say a word. Then, quite quietly and politely, he picked up the necklace and begged her pardon for having caused a scene. But, he said, he could not allow her to return it. When he gave a present he did not take

it back again, and she must do him the honor of wearing the necklace as long as she lived. With that he put it round her neck, and drew the ends tight in his hands with all his force.

"Strangled her?"

"Yes."

"Pah! What a beastly story!"

"Isn't it?"

"Still, it's a magnificent necklace," Drury said.

"Oh, quite," Vawdrey answered, as he rose. "But I'm superstitious enough not to want it myself. There's blood on it."

CHAPTER VII

THE hoaxing of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, and the hilarious dinner which followed, had pitched the mood of the party too high for the usual game of bridge or pool; and when the men came from the dining-room an impromptu dance was suggested.

"Oh, do let's!" Ethel cried. "Mother will play—won't you, mother?"

"Of course I will, dear. You had better ring for Gibson to push back the chairs and move the rugs."

"Is it fancy dress?" Vawdrey asked. "If so, will somebody find me a false nose and an opera hat?"

In a few minutes the hall was cleared, and Mrs. Vawdrey began to play *The Blue Danube*. Vawdrey led off with Lady Benyon, Drury following with Mrs. Dayrell-Wing; while Sir Charles, with a laconic "Shall we?" took possession of Hilda Carew. Fraser never danced if he could avoid it, and by tacit agreement Ethel was left to Willie Pfeiffer.

"Our dance?" he said in a low voice.

"If you like," she answered, with a quick smile. "There's not much choice of partners, is there?"

"Enough for me."

For a minute or two he sat beside her on the

sofa, while she drew on her long white gloves. Then they went spinning down the hall together, past the other couples and back again, as Mrs. Vawdrey's music quickened to a close. The drawing-room door was open, and he guided her in, threading a hazardous way between the tables and chairs until they reached the far end of the room. She was breathless with the pace they had made, and looked up at him with a flushed face and laughing eyes. She was irresistibly lovely, and his passion for her, which he had been struggling to keep in check for months past, surged up within him and burst its bonds. He bent toward her impulsively, and caught her hands in his as he whispered:

"Darling."

The word had been on his lips so many times, and he had choked it back because he was poor and in debt and she was a millionairess. He knew that he must marry money; but this flirtation with Ethel, begun as a pastime which might possibly lead to a successful business arrangement, had deepened into love. The disparity of fortune, which at first had attracted him to her, now seemed unbearable, for he wanted to give and not to take. He wanted her for herself, and not for the money she would bring.

The nearer he drew to the attainment of his hopes the more he dreaded the verdict of the world, the impartial acceptance of him as a clever fortune-hunter who had "pulled it off." Her parents would

suspect him, even she herself could scarcely avoid doing so, and the thought had restrained him again and again from asking her to marry him. If only he were rich! If only even he were free from the load of foolish debts which his extravagance had put round his neck! Before he married Ethel, Vawdrey would have to pay them; and the thought which a year ago would have been pleasant enough was now offensive to his conscience.

But the moment had come when nothing could avail to stem his desire. He forgot everything as he looked into her eyes.

Her color deepened, but she did not draw back. She let him kiss her on the lips. Then, without a word, they turned and went back into the hall.

As they came out of the drawing-room they met Vawdrey face to face, and at the sight of him Pfeiffer's anxieties returned upon him more acutely than ever. If only, he thought, he were free from debts! Then he would not mind so much.

BOOK II

EARNEST

CHAPTER I

IT was after one o'clock before the dancing came to an end. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing went to her room and began slowly to undress. She was tired and excited by the events of the evening, and she wished that she had not given Céleste permission to go to bed. She put on a kimono, and sat down by the fire to brush her hair; but her thoughts began to wander and soon her hands lay idly in her lap. She was thinking about Arthur Drury—how nice he was; and, she reflected with a thrill of pleasure, how devoted.

He was in love with her. And in telling herself this she was careful to guard herself against the optimism of a woman no longer in the flush of youth. She knew she could be attractive to any man sensible enough to realize that loveliness has its times and seasons. She knew there were hours when she could hold her own even against a girl like Ethel Vawdrey; and, good heavens, how much cleverer she was! Ethel was lovely, but she had not yet shaken off the *gaucherie* of eighteen; she had not yet learnt that nature never yet made a woman's lips red enough.

She knew she could hold Arthur against any girl in the world. But would she always hold him? She was getting unwisely fond of him, counting too much on his attention; showing, perhaps too openly,

that she expected it. That was dangerous. Would he "last"? At forty would he be content with a woman older than himself, who dare not meet him until she had spent an hour in preparation? That was the maddening quality of youth, that power of waking up lovely. But then, youth had no reticence, no reserve of charm; it was as open as the day, and—as lacking in surprises.

She smiled as she recalled the light which had flashed into Arthur's eyes when he met her last night on the way down to dinner. She was wearing a white frock of daring simplicity, and across her shoulders Céleste had thrown a wrap of bandanna silk widely edged with blue. The effect had pleased her, and when she saw Arthur's eyes her pleasure swelled into triumph. He had flushed up as he looked at her; and then, as they went down the staircase together, he had lightly touched her hand. Oh, yes; he was in love with her. And, unless she was deceiving herself, he would propose as soon as she let him do so. The question was, should she accept him? Why not? It was a risk, for there was nearly ten years between them; but a woman's life seemed to be made up of risks—risk of failure, of ill-health, of swiftly declining charm, of defeat. Was not the happiest woman facing these always?

She sat, engrossed in her thoughts, until she was roused by a clock striking two. Then, with an attempt to put Arthur out of her mind, she went to bed.

She dozed off; but her sleep was light, and was broken by scraps of vivid dreaming, in which Arthur, and the necklace, and masked burglars played disjointed parts. Several times she woke, only to fall again immediately into the state of semi-consciousness which is the battleground between an overtired body and the deep sleep for which it craves. Once she thought some one was in her room; she heard, or seemed to hear, the click of a door. She turned on her back and listened, but there was not a sound; and she told herself that it must have been part of a dream.

She drew the bed-clothes closer about her and fell asleep—more soundly now, for her mind was rested, and was able to yield itself to nature's demands. For some hours she lay in complete unconsciousness. Then she awoke refreshed. The curtains were closely drawn and the room was dark; but the fire had gone out, and she guessed it must be nearly time for Céleste to come. She pressed the knob of a repeater which stood by her bedside and was disappointed to find that it was not yet six o'clock.

She lay back again and tried to go to sleep; but she could not keep her eyes closed. The absolute stillness of the house began to get on her nerves. For a few minutes she tossed and turned, shaking up her pillows and changing her position. At last, certain that her efforts were useless, she got up. She would draw the curtains and read until Céleste brought the early tea.

She felt her way cautiously across the room to the windows. She pulled back the curtains and drew up the blinds, letting in a flood of daylight. One window was open at the top, but the room felt close and stuffy, and she raised the bottom sash, pushing it up as high as she could. The effort tired her, and for a few minutes she sat down on the broad window-seat, breathing in the delicious air, which was as crisp and cool as a glass of spring water. Then, feeling chilly, she looked round for the book she wanted before going back to bed.

The dressing-table stood across the corner near the right-hand window, slanted toward the wall so as to catch the light upon the glass. As she turned her eyes fell on it; and, indefinitely for the first moment, she missed something which ought to have been there.

"My necklace!"

She took a hasty step forward. The little jewel-case, which stood on the right-hand shelf beside the glass, was gone. Quickly she looked round—on the table and the other shelves, in the little drawers, then about the room.

"But I put it there last night," she said, looking again at the empty shelf. "I'm sure I put it there." She stood thinking, hurriedly, excitedly.

"I know I put it there," she said, "but where is it?"

She began carefully to search every table and shelf and cupboard, spurring herself to recall that she had put it "somewhere safe" when she took it

off last night. She remembered unfastening it and laying it in its case; and the more she thought the more certain she was that she had put the case on the top right-hand shelf of the dressing-table as usual.

And it had disappeared.

After a fruitless ten minutes she stopped and stood thinking. Then a rather angry smile crossed her face as a possible explanation of the mystery occurred to her.

"I suppose it's another joke," she said. "I'm rather tired of Willie Pfeiffer's jokes. I think I'll lose my temper this time."

Her mind was set at rest. She moved a step forward, meaning to get into bed and read. Then a sudden thought stopped her. She always slept with her door bolted, and from where she stood she could see that it was bolted now.

Again she searched every corner of the room, ransacked every drawer; following, even, Willie Pfeiffer's example of the night before in looking under the bed. It was gone, spirited away through a bolted door. If Céleste had been with her—but she always trusted her absolutely; and, besides, she had not been with her.

She gazed round the walls, searching for any clue which might guide her. She knew that necklaces, however valuable, did not vanish through solid walls and ceilings at the bidding of either a practical joker or a professional burglar; and she could not help imagining that she must have put

it in some place which she could not now remember. And yet, how absurd such an idea was.

"It must have been stolen," she said at length. "But how? I thought I heard a door close."

In her agitation she had overlooked the inner door which led into Pfeiffer's room and was covered by a curtain. It caught her attention now, and she went toward it and lifted the curtain. The bolt on her side was unfastened.

"Then it was a joke!"

Relieved at knowing that her necklace was safe she became extremely angry with Willie Pfeiffer. To use the door between her room and his, and to come into her room at night—it was outrageous, compromising, odious. What would everybody think? Why, naturally, that he had come that way before! What would—what would Arthur think? Oh, it was hateful!

She slipped on a dressing-gown and sat down at the writing-table. Snatching up a pen, she began to write rapidly:

DEAR MR. PFEIFFER:

"I am afraid your sense of humor is rather beyond what I am accustomed to, and though I never wish to spoil sport, I must ask you to leave me out of any future plans you may devise.

"Will you kindly return my necklace by my maid, who will deliver this note? And will you refrain from mentioning your cleverness to any one at all?

"If you do not see your way to do this I shall have to take the matter more seriously —so seriously that you will find it desirable to leave the house.

"Yours truly,
"M. DAYRELL-WING."

She put the letter into an envelope and addressed it to Pfeiffer. Then she got into bed again and tried to concentrate her attention upon her book.

At eight o'clock Céleste knocked at the door. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing slipped out of bed and drew back the bolt, calling: "Come in." Then, as Céleste put the tea-tray by the bedside, she held out the letter, saying: "Take this to Mr. Pfeiffer's room, please. Knock, and give it him yourself, and wait there for an answer. Don't send one of the men—you understand?"

"Oui, madame."

She heard Céleste knock on Pfeiffer's door once, and then again more slowly. Then a sleepy voice called out:

"What is it?"

Céleste explained that there was a letter awaiting reply, and after a moment Mrs. Dayrell-Wing heard him go to the door. He closed it again, and a long silence followed. A feeling of panic began to take possession of her. What was he doing? Why did he not give Céleste the jewel-case? What could he be thinking about? Was it possible that he meant to carry the joke further? It was monstrous. Her reputation!

She flushed up hotly, and her anger rose higher. She would not suffer it; she would go at once to Mr. Vawdrey and have Pfeiffer turned out of the house. Not that that would help her with Arthur, for nothing could do that. Whatever she said or did, he would never believe that Pfeiffer had been in her room uninvited. Joke or no joke, he would suspect her, and he would quietly draw away from her.

"And I *do* care for him," she cried, suddenly bursting into tears.

Her vain little life, so gay until a few hours ago, seemed on the point of ruin at the hands of a clumsy jester trying to raise a laugh. It was cruel.

Unable to bear the suspense longer she opened the door an inch and called softly:

"Céleste."

"Madame?"

"Where is the answer to my note?"

"Monsieur Pfeiffer told me to wait. I am waiting, madame."

"Knock again and say you must have it at once. And then come in to me."

She closed the door and listened. Should she speak to Pfeiffer through the door which separated their rooms? No, it would only compromise her further.

In a moment she heard Pfeiffer respond to Céleste's knocking, and immediately afterwards Céleste brought her a letter.

"Where is the necklace?" rose to her lips, but she checked herself and tore open the envelope.

"DEAR MRS. DAYRELL-WING:

"If this is a return joke I am afraid it is I who am dense. The last I saw of your necklace was when you were wearing it last night. If, as you seem to imply, it has disappeared, I cannot imagine who has taken it. Yours sincerely,

"W. P."

She glanced through the letter and threw it on the table. For some time she stood looking out of the window, her eyes full of wild anxiety. She did not know whether to believe Pfeiffer or not. At last she took up a pen and wrote:

"It has disappeared. Joking apart, and on your honor, do you know anything about it? For heaven's sake tell me. Say yes or no to Céleste.

"M. D.-W."

"Take this to Mr. Pfeiffer," she said, "and he will give you a message for me. Come back at once, and do not speak to any of the servants if you see them."

Céleste, aflame with curiosity, left the room. She returned almost immediately, saying:

"Monsieur says no."

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's first feeling was one of relief, for there was no longer question of her reputation being damaged by Pfeiffer's thoughtlessness

or malice. That would have been far more serious than the loss of the necklace. It was certain now that her diamonds had been stolen, but how it had been done she could not imagine. She stood tapping the table with her fingers, her forehead drawn into lines of perplexity, until Céleste's curiosity overcame her discretion.

"Madame is disturbed?" she asked, wondering what could have passed between Pfeiffer and her mistress. In the gossip of the servants' hall their names had never been coupled; and, indeed, it was well known that he was aiming higher, and that she was giving favorable consideration to Arthur Drury.

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing turned and looked at her, saying: "Céleste, my necklace has been stolen."

"Madame!" Céleste screamed, running to the dressing-table and searching it hurriedly.

"Yes; I've looked there and everywhere. It's gone."

"But madame was wearing it last night. There has been no one here?" she asked in a tone of doubtful inquiry.

"Of course there's been no one here," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing answered sharply.

"But madame remembers putting it away after the dancing?"

"Yes. I remember it perfectly. And when I woke this morning and drew back the curtains it was gone. I thought it must be another joke. The note you took to Mr. Pfeiffer was to ask him if,

by some means—I can't think how—they had hidden it again, as they did yesterday. He says he knows nothing about it."

"Then it is stolen! Some one must have entered madame's room?"

"I suppose so. But how did they get in? The door was bolted."

"The window—through the garden."

Céleste, in a whirl of agitation, rushed to the window and looked out, as if she thought the burglar might still be in sight.

"That one was shut. The other one was only open a small piece at the top and the blinds were down, so I don't see how any one could have got in that way."

"Then——?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing cried impatiently. "What's the use of asking questions when I tell you I know nothing?"

"Pardon, madame, but——"

"Yes, yes. I must think what to do. If I let you go can I trust you to say nothing downstairs?"

"Ye-es, madame," Céleste answered reluctantly.

"Then take care you don't. And come back and dress me in half an hour."

Left alone, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing sat down on the window-seat and went again over every point in the story which she would have to tell. Satisfied with that, she considered what she had better do. She was not an exact thinker, and, naturally, she had had no training in detective methods; so,

being satisfied that Pfeiffer was not hoaxing her, she made no serious attempt to guess how the necklace could have disappeared. Instead, her attention was directed to the most tactful way of dealing with an awkward situation; for it was the first time she had stayed with the Vawdreys, and she realized that it was anything but pleasant for them that such a thing should happen to her while she was in their house.

By the time Céleste returned her mind was made up, and she had written a note to Mrs. Vawdrey, asking her to come to her room as soon as possible. Céleste delivered it, and brought back the answer that Mrs. Vawdrey would be with her in a quarter of an hour.

CHAPTER II

UNLIKE her husband, Mrs. Vawdrey had not succeeded in retaining her youthfulness beyond its normal period. It requires a masculine force of character to do so without taking thought, and a woman seldom remains young unless she makes an effort, or, more generally, a perpetual series of efforts. A man may be a boy at heart when he is seventy; but a girl's heart ages with her face, and it is rare to find a woman of fifty who is young without preserving a youthful appearance.

Mrs. Vawdrey was the last woman in the world to be attracted by hair-dye and uncomfortable corsets, and having married Tom Vawdrey she straightway declined upon an easy existence with great good humor. Before she had reached forty she was spoken of as motherly. Her hair was now gray, and she wore it parted in the middle and brushed smoothly over her large head. Her kindly eyes looked out from a ruddy face, and she was growing extremely stout. She usually dressed in rich black or brown materials, relieved by priceless Irish lace, of which she had a large collection. Her skirts followed no change of fashion: they were always short enough in front to show her feet in broad kid shoes, and they always trailed on the ground behind with a satisfactory noise of silk.

Her dressmaker had been the favorite *modiste* of Queen Victoria.

"I wonder what Mrs. Dayrell-Wing wants?" she said to her husband. "She asks me to go to her room at once."

"She's ill, I should think. Hope it's nothing serious."

Mrs. Vawdrey hurriedly finished dressing and went to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room.

"May I come in?" she called, knocking on the door.

"Is that Mrs. Vawdrey? Oh, please do."

"I hope you're not ill," Mrs. Vawdrey said, as she entered.

"No, not ill, thanks. But I'm in such dreadful trouble, and I thought it better to ask you to come here."

"Why, what is it?" Mrs. Vawdrey asked, as near to alarm as her comfortable existence ever allowed her to be.

"My necklace—it's been stolen."

"Stolen? And how can that be? You were wearing it last night."

"I know I was. And I put it away myself. I woke about six and got up to draw the curtains, and when I looked on the dressing-table it wasn't there."

"But are you sure? No one could have got in while you were here; you'd have heard them."

"Well, some one did. I *was* disturbed in the night. I thought I heard a door closing, and then,

when I listened, it was all quiet, so I went to sleep again."

Mrs. Vawdrey looked anxious. It was most disagreeable for people to lose things when they were staying with you. She believed the servants to be honest, but one could never be certain, especially when other people's servants were there as well.

"I'm very sorry," she said. "It's really dreadful. Do you suspect any one—your maid?"

"No. I had sent her to bed and I undressed myself."

"Well, I must tell my husband at once. He will know what is best to be done. Will you wait here? I will come back."

Mrs. Vawdrey hastened away. She was unaccustomed to emergencies, for Tom Vawdrey always knew how to do the right thing at the right moment, and she always left it to him to do.

"Tom," she said, halting at the door of his dressing-room, "a terrible thing has happened! Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace has been stolen."

Vawdrey stopped shaving and turned to her.

"Stolen? Nonsense! When?"

"After she took it off last night."

"But where was it? Doesn't she keep it in her room?"

"Yes, that's just it. She knows it was there when she went to bed, and when she woke at six it was gone."

"That's a pretty tall story."

He rubbed his chin reflectively and looked at his wife.

"Well, dear, that's what she says. I think you'd better come and talk to her."

"Yes, let's go together. I'm just ready."

He put away the razor and finished dressing. Then he followed his wife to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room. His idea was that some "fooling" lay at the bottom of the matter, either a repetition of last night's hoax or a retort to it.

"Probably," he thought, "she has hidden it and will accuse Pfeiffer of carrying it off, in order to get even with him. It's a wretched attempt at a joke."

But when he saw the anxious expression of her face, and her evidently genuine distress, he was obliged to let this theory go.

"You say," he said, when he had listened to her story, "that you know you put it away last night?"

"Yes, and it was gone this morning."

"Did you leave the room after you took it off?"

"No."

"And the windows—were they open?"

"One was open at the top. And the blinds were both down and the curtains drawn."

"Was your door bolted?"

"The outer door was. And I thought the inner one was, but when I looked this morning I found it wasn't. So, of course, I thought it was another of Mr. Pfeiffer's jokes."

"It probably is."

"No. I asked him."

"Well, *I'll* ask him."

He went into the passage and rapped on Pfeiffer's door.

"May I come in? It's me—Vawdrey."

"Oh, come in. Excuse my get-up; I'm just shaving. What's Mrs. Dayrell-Wing up to with her necklace? She's accused me of hiding it again."

"Well, haven't you?"

"No."

"Honor bright—no fooling?"

"Absolutely."

"Then it's beginning to look awkward. Somebody's got it. The poor little lady's nearly off her head."

"By Jove! Burglars?"

"Seems so. It's altogether mysterious. She says her door was bolted and the window only open at the top, but the door into this room is unbolted."

"It's bolted on this side," Pfeiffer said, looking at it.

"But not on hers. For the moment it looks as if the thief had come through your room. Were you disturbed at all?"

"No. I slept right through until the maid knocked me up this morning with her note."

"You're a pretty good sleeper, of course," Vawdrey said, with a brief smile.

"Yes, I daresay some one could have come in without waking me. But how did he get in? My door was bolted."

"Was it? Sure?"

"Certain. I remember unfastening it to take in the note."

"There's the window."

"Yes, that's a possibility with a ladder."

"H'm. Let's make sure no one's hiding here now."

They searched the room thoroughly, but found nothing; and, after a pause, Vawdrey returned to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing.

"No. That's all right," he said.

He stood looking about him, wondering what was the best course to pursue. His wife and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing waited for his decision. He guessed that in some material particular Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's memory must be inaccurate: either she *had* left her room after taking off the necklace or she had not put it away. The latter possibility gave him an idea.

"You must have dropped it last night when you were dancing," he said with conviction. "We'll have a search made downstairs."

"I don't think so," she answered doubtfully. "I so clearly remember taking it off."

"Oh, memories often play tricks. I'm sure that's it. Come along to breakfast and I'll tell Gibson to hunt for it."

He held open the door, and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, somewhat comforted by his assurance, was going out when Mrs. Vawdrey said:

"But the case——?"

"Oh, by Jove!" Vawdrey exclaimed. His wife's question broke his pleasant theory in pieces.

"Yes, you weren't wearing the case, were you!" he added.

"No, and I *know* I put it in when I undressed," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing cried, turning back again. Her anxiety returned upon her all the more heavily for the brief respite.

"That cock won't fight, then," Vawdrey said. " 'Pon my soul, it's a puzzler, isn't it?"

"We must send for the police," Mrs. Vawdrey said, ready to accept the inevitable without further effort.

"I suppose we must. Though I can't help thinking it will turn up."

"But how can it?" Mrs. Dayrell-Wing demanded, growing exasperated at his slowness. "The police ought to come at once; every moment is important."

"Yes, you're quite right," Vawdrey at length agreed, not seeing what else could be done. "But the village constable's no use. I'll send the motor, and telegraph to Edinburgh for a detective. He'll be here by lunch-time."

"I'm so sorry to be such a trouble; but it *is* urgent, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. All I wanted was to make sure that it really had been stolen. Now, with your permission, I'll just search this room thoroughly and lock it up. I'll lock up Pfeiffer's, too, so that the servants sha'n't come in and destroy any pos-

sible traces. Can you manage without coming in here again during the morning?"

"Oh, yes."

"You take Mrs. Dayrell-Wing down to breakfast, my dear," he said to his wife. "I'll make arrangements."

The two ladies went downstairs. Vawdrey went to Pfeiffer's room, and, finding him gone, locked the door and took away the key. Then he went back to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room and searched it. When he had finished he rang the bell. One of the housemaids came, and he sent her to fetch Gibson, who presently appeared, walking with the leisured dignity of an archbishop. He had heard that a burglary had taken place, for Mademoiselle Céleste was more voluble than discreet; but he was neither excited nor hurried by the news.

"Oh, look here, Gibson," Vawdrey said. "I suppose you've heard what's happened?"

"I did hear, sir," Gibson answered, with a proper disinclination to admit the knowledge of facts which had not been officially communicated to him. "Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's maid is taken 'ysterical, sir, being foreign."

"Yes, and the necklace is taken hysterical, too. I'm blessed if I know what to make of it."

"No, sir. Mysterious, it looks like."

"Anyhow, I'm sending for a detective, and I'm locking up these two rooms till he comes. Just sit here in the passage and see that no one tries to get in. Mind, I don't suspect any one in the house for

a moment; but I want to make sure that the rooms remain untouched."

"Very good, sir."

Vawdrey went to his study to write a telegram, and then to the stables to find the chauffeur and send him off at once. On his way out he met Arthur Drury, coming down late for breakfast.

"Morning, Arthur," he said.

"Good morning. You've finished breakfast very early."

"I haven't had any yet, worse luck. You've not heard the news?"

"No. What news?"

"It's pretty serious. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace has been stolen."

"Good heavens!" Drury cried, turning white. "Stolen? When?"

"Last night."

Drury stammered and seemed scarcely able to speak.

"B-but——"

Then he added quickly: "You know my firm has insured it. It'll be an awful facer."

"But you said the risk was spread about; it doesn't all fall on you?"

"No, but they'll be wild. They didn't much want to take it on only I pressed it. Look here, I must wire to London at once; it's serious."

"All right. The car's going in two minutes. I'm sending for a detective from Edinburgh. Run into my study and write your message."

"I think I'll go down and wire from the telegraph office. Then I shall get an answer quicker. Just let me get a coat."

"Oh, don't do that. You'd better have breakfast. The chauffeur can wait and bring the answer."

"No, no. I couldn't eat anything."

He rushed off to fetch his coat and rejoined Vawdrey in the stable-yard. In a few moments the car had started and was running on top speed through the park on its way to Stilkirk, eight miles away. Vawdrey had instructed the chauffeur to wait at the telegraph office for a reply. Then he was to go on to Montrose to meet the express from Edinburgh and bring back the detective.

Both in the dining-room and in the servants' hall breakfast was more than usually interrupted by eager conversation, and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, like Mademoiselle Céleste, was "taken hysterical." The loss of the necklace did not weigh too heavily on her mind, for that was to fall on other people, of whom, unfortunately, Arthur Drury was one. But the thought of a burglar in her room, and of what her fate might have been if she had awakened and cried out, unnerved her completely. The danger from which she had escaped loomed terrifically large, and the conversation round the table magnified it and brought it more vividly before her.

"He'd have sandbagged you," Sir Charles said with conviction. "They always do."

The picture brought tears of abject fright to her eyes.

"Well, anyway you didn't wake," Hilda Carew said, attempting to encourage her.

"No; I wish I had for some things," Mrs. Dayrell-Ring moaned. "Then I should at least know who the thief was."

"It really is too horrible," Ethel cried. "I shall be frightened to death at sleeping alone here now. I suppose it *isn't* a joke, Mr. Pfeiffer?" she added, turning to him.

"Upon my soul, no," Pfeiffer answered earnestly. "I knew absolutely nothing about it till I heard this morning."

Neither Pfeiffer nor Leslie Fraser had taken much part in the conversation. They seemed to feel that, in a measure, they might be thought responsible for what had happened, inasmuch as the joke of the previous evening had possibly suggested the idea of the robbery. Evidently, it had been committed by some one familiar with the house, and the opinion was general that, whoever the thief was, one of the servants had had a hand in it. Mrs. Vawdrey frankly declared for the second footman, on no stronger grounds than because he had a shifty eye. Lady Benyon, on the contrary, thought it must be Céleste, because she had once had a French maid who stole a brooch.

Breakfast was drawing to a close when the suspected footman brought a message from Gibson that he wished to speak to Mr. Vawdrey.

"Has he found anything?" Vawdrey asked.

He ran out of the room, and the others streamed after him up the stairs. Gibson was standing by the door of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room.

"I found this just here, under the mat, sir," he said, holding out the small flat jewel-case in which the necklace was kept.

It was empty.

BOOK III

WHAT JAMES McVITIE DISCOVERED

CHAPTER I

THE car returned to Gains about two o'clock, bringing the detective and his assistant, who had caught the morning train from Edinburgh. Arthur Drury was not with them. He had sent a note by the chauffeur, saying that he had got through to London on the telephone, and had decided to go up by the afternoon express to consult with his firm.

The detective, James McVitie, was an able man of the official type, with a great experience of criminal investigation. His appearance gave no indication either of his profession or of his standing in it, for he was utterly unlike the keen-eyed, hatchet-faced men who, in fiction, are called in to unravel a mystery. He was tall and thin, and had red hair, and a moustache flecked with gray. His complexion was leathery and of a uniform brownish color, and the skin hung in loose folds over the high cheek-bones and the strongly moulded jaw. His pale blue eyes were rather narrow and almost devoid of lashes. They lacked expression, and, either from practice or naturally, they seldom reflected the thoughts which were passing in his mind. He spoke slowly, with a slight Scotch accent, and he was as economical with words as the proverbial Scotchman is with money. He seemed to grudge each one as it fell from his lips. He was dressed

in a suit of dark tweed, a good deal worn, with a black overcoat and square-shaped felt hat. In a town he would have passed for a merchant in a small way of business; in the country one might have guessed him to be a tax collector or a traveler for a small brewery.

On arriving at Gains he was shown into the study; and Vawdrey, who had just sat down to lunch, went in to see him.

"Good morning," he said. "You are Mr.——?"

"McVitie."

"Ah! We've got a tiresome business here for you to clear up."

"A robbery."

"Yes. I'll tell you about it. But, first of all, hadn't you better have lunch? Will you join us or do you prefer to be alone?"

"I'll take it with my assistant, thank you."

"Then I'll tell the butler to bring you some in here, and I'll rejoin you as soon as we've finished."

McVitie made no reply, and Vawdrey went back to the dining-room, where he was assailed by eager questions about the great detective.

"No," he answered, "he doesn't look like Sherlock Holmes, or Lecoq, or any of them. He's just an uncommonly ugly Scotchman of the commercial type—the sort you see on Glasgow Central platform in thousands."

"He doesn't sound very clever," Lady Benyon said.

"Oh, detectives never are, except in France. In

this country we have no use for the romantic person who invents the theory to fit the crime; he'd be upsetting no end of first-class reputations."

Fraser smiled, saying:

"Stevenson has something like that in one of his books. You set a stone rolling from the top of a hill and it knocks over some old bird who is quietly sitting in his back-garden."

"I wish I knew the old bird who had got my necklace," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said energetically. "I'd knock him over, even if he was a clergyman."

"It couldn't be a clergyman," Pfeiffer answered, with a flicker of reviving merriment.

"Why not?"

"Well, a necklace like that is no use unless you wear a low frock. It wouldn't look at all well on a cassock."

"How silly you are," she said pettishly.

As soon as luncheon was over Vawdrey went back to the study.

"Now, Mr. McVitie," he said, "if you are ready let's get to work. Shall I tell you as much as I know or will you see Mrs. Dayrell-Wing at once?"

"You can tell me what you know," McVitie answered with cool indifference, as he signed to his clerk to take notes.

Vawdrey gave him the outlines of the story, and ended by mentioning how the empty box had been found by Gibson outside Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's door. McVitie sat for some minutes without speaking. At last he said:

"You say her door into the passage was bolted, but the door into the next room was unbolted on her side?"

"Yes."

"Who sleeps in the next room?"

"Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Have the rooms been disturbed since the discovery?"

"No; I locked them both up. Here's the key."

McVitie nodded his approval. After a further pause he said:

"You will kindly give me the names of every one who slept in the house last night."

"There was myself and my wife and daughter, Sir Charles and Lady Benyon——"

"Of Anchinsale?"

"Yes. Miss Carew——"

"Who is she?"

"She's the daughter of Armand Carew. They're colonial merchants in a large way of business in London."

"Yes. Go on, please."

"Then—Mr. Leslie Fraser. I bought this place from him a few months ago. I don't think he has lived here for some years."

"No. It's been let mostly for the shooting. He's known by reputation."

"And Mr. Pfeiffer."

"German?"

"Naturalized."

"What is his business?"

"He's on the Stock Exchange."

"Do you know anything of his means?"

"Oh, he seems to spend about the same as every one else."

"Unmarried?"

"Yes."

"You have known him long—intimately?"

"Fairly so. He often dines with us in London and one meets him about."

"Just a man about town?"

"Yes; but a very good sort," Vawdrey said. Then he added:

"Aren't we wasting time rather?"

"I want to know whom I'm meeting," McVitie answered curtly.

Vawdrey was nettled by his tone, but he was too much a man of business to show it. From what he had seen of him he did not take to McVitie, and was not much impressed by his capability. He struck him as being rather stupid and rather rude. He did not inspire confidence or give the idea that the frequent pauses in his conversation arose from anything more than slowness of comprehension.

"Is there any one else?" McVitie asked.

"One other, Mr. Arthur Drury. He, as well as Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, is directly interested in the matter. He is an underwriter at Lloyds, and his firm have insured the necklace."

"For its full value?"

"I believe so—twenty thousand pounds."

"And the lady—what do you know of her?"

"Oh—er—she lives in London. She's an Australian, and came to England after her husband died."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know exactly. I suppose we've known her for a couple of years."

"She's quite alone here—no relations?"

"I never heard of any."

"Do you know anything of her means?"

"Nothing whatever. Like every one else, I should say she spent a great deal of money."

"Thank you. We will go through the servants next."

"I'd better get my wife to help me there."

Mrs. Vawdrey came in presently, and McVitie took the names of the household staff, with notes of their length of service and general character. She disclosed to him her supicions of the second footman, but he seemed as little interested in them as in the unblemished record of Gibson and the housekeeper. He listened always with an air of cold disbelief, as if he suspected everybody of lying, or, at the best, of having nothing to say which was worth attention.

When he had made a list of the indoor servants he went on to the garden and stable staff; and as soon as this had been completed he said abruptly:

"I'll see the lady now. We might go up to her room."

CHAPTER II

MRS. VAWDREY went to find Mrs. Dayrell-Wing. When she came McVitie bowed awkwardly, looking her up and down with a perfectly expressionless stare.

"We'll go upstairs, ma'am, if you please," he said.

Vawdrey led the way and unlocked the door. Gibson was still sitting in the passage. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing entered the room first, followed by McVitie, his assistant, and Vawdrey. McVitie glanced around the room. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, high-strung and bubbling with the desire to tell her story, began to speak to him, but he cut her short with a terse: "Wait, please." He walked to the windows and looked out; then he opened the wardrobe as if, she afterward declared, he expected to find the thief still hiding there. Then he lifted the curtain which covered the door communicating with Pfeiffer's room, dropped it, and turned to the dressing-table.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing to the larger case, in which she kept her miscellaneous jewelry.

"That's my jewel-case. The necklace, you know, I kept in a separate one."

"The one I showed you downstairs," Vawdrey put in.

"Where was that put?"

"Here," she said, laying her hand on the top shelf beside the glass.

"Was it always put there? Could any one who knew rely on finding it there?"

"It was always there. I've only been in the house a week."

"When you came, did you tell your maid to put it there?"

"I don't know that I *told* her. She put it there when she unpacked, I suppose."

"Why didn't you lock it up and keep the key?"

"I never carry keys; they're so inconvenient. At home my maid keeps the key of the jewel-safe."

He did not reply, and she added:

"I daresay you think that's very silly. But you *must* trust some one when your dressmaker refuses to let you have a pocket."

A faint sarcastic smile flickered across McVitie's leathery face; but he said nothing, and the pause lengthened.

Presently he began to question her again.

"You wore the necklace last night?"

"Yes. And when I came up to bed I remember taking it off and putting it in its case. My maid had a headache, and——"

"Wait, please," McVitie interrupted, cutting her short again.

She turned to Vawdrey with a gesture of annoyance. She thought McVitie the most tiresome man she had ever met.

"Do you remember putting the case on the shelf?" he asked.

"Of course I do. Where else should I put it?"

"You might have put it on the table or in a drawer."

"Well, I didn't," she snapped.

"After putting it there you went to bed at once?"

"Not at once. I sat by the fire for some time."

"But you did not leave the room?"

"No."

"You are sure you did not leave the room?"

"Positive."

"And you got up early this morning and opened the blinds? And then you noticed it had gone?"

"Yes. I couldn't sleep, and I meant to read a book until I was called. I had drawn back the curtains, and as I turned round I saw it had gone. I searched everywhere for it——"

"Then you weren't quite certain you had put it on the shelf," McVitie interrupted.

"Yes, I was. But I might have been mistaken."

"Ah! We will search again later."

"It's no use doing that. You won't find it here."

McVitie now went to the door, where he spent some minutes in examining the lock.

"Your door was bolted?" he asked, when he had finished.

"Yes."

"Was that unusual?"

"No; I always bolt it."

"You had no special reason in your mind last night to make you bolt it?"

"No. Why should I?"

"You are quite sure you bolted it last night?"

"Quite. I remember looking; and, besides, I had to get up and go to the door when my maid called me."

"Were the windows open?"

"One was open at the top; the other was shut."

McVitie went to each window in turn and lifted the lower sash as gently as he was able. Like most Georgian windows, they were heavy and close-fitting, and it was impossible to open them without a good deal of noise.

"Would you have heard that if you had been asleep?"

"Certainly I should. I sleep very lightly—in fact, I often have difficulty in sleeping at all."

"Do you ever take anything for it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Any medicine?"

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was furious.

"If you're asking me whether I take drugs I can tell you I don't!" she cried energetically.

"A good many do," he answered, with unruffled composure.

Vawdrey frowned. Like Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, he thought McVitie remarkably wanting in manners. It was not what he said which offended them, for they knew it was his business to ask questions; it was his disregard of all those polite forms of circumlocution which civilized people use as a matter of habit.

McVitie turned toward the door which led into Pfeiffer's room. Evidently, it was not intended to

be used, for the curtain in front of it was not slung upon rings, but was held up by a light pole passed through the hem at the top. There was a space about nine inches deep between the curtain and the door, which opened outward from Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room, the hinges being on the side farthest from the windows.

He took a tape measure from his pocket and gave his assistant some notes. The dressing-table being set at an angle from the window, the shelf where the necklace was kept was within three feet of the curtain.

"Has the table been moved?" he asked.

"No."

He lifted the curtain and looked behind it.

"Are you nervous at night?" he asked.

"No."

"You don't generally look round the room before going to bed?"

"No."

"Then, if any one had been behind this curtain when you came up last night you would not have found it out?"

"No. I remember looking the first night I was here to see if the door was bolted."

"Was it?"

"Yes."

"It isn't now."

"I know it isn't. I discovered that this morning."

"Have you at any time unbolted it?"

"No. Why should I?"

"You might have wished to go into the next room."

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing colored up hotly, and was about to speak when Vawdrey interposed, saying:

"You forget, Mr. McVitie, the room was not empty. Mr. Pfeiffer had it."

McVitie nodded, but made no remark. He was perfectly aware that Pfeiffer had it.

Signing to his assistant to hold back the curtain he took out a magnifying glass, and carefully examined the bolt and the woodwork round it. The paint was fresh and there were no marks upon it. The bolt was a new one—a small brass bolt, carefully fixed, and running easily in its channel. Originally, the door seemed to have had a mortice lock, with a handle and keyhole on each side; but this had been removed and the holes had been plugged. The work did not look recent, but, owing to the paint, it was impossible to tell how long ago it had been done. His glass travelled down the sides of the opening, and, very slowly, across the floor.

"A candle, please," he said.

He took it out of the candlestick and held it close to the floor, crouching down and peering through his glass at every inch of surface. At last he seemed satisfied and rose from his knees, saying:

"I should like to see the woman who cleans the room."

The order was given, and when the maid came he asked her without preface:

"How often do you sweep behind this curtain?"

"I don't know, sir," she stammered, looking frightened.

"Have you ever swept behind it?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Did you do it yesterday?"

"I don't rightly remember, sir."

"Come, don't you remember lifting the curtain and passing your brush round?"

"Oh, I do remember it, sir; but I can't say positive as it was yesterday or the day before. Mrs. Pannell's very particular about the rooms being kep' clean, but there isn't no dust here to speak of—not like it is in London."

McVitie bore with her, though the expression on his face indicated a desire to box her ears.

"When you are cleaning the room," he began again, "do you ever open this door, so as to go through from one room to the other?"

"No, never, sir. That I'm positive of."

"That'll do, then."

The girl withdrew, and McVitie, turning to Vawdrey, said:

"I'll not trouble you further just now. I'm busy here for a time. Later I'll see Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Very well. Let me know when you want him. Shall we go down, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing? I expect you'd like a cup of tea; it's past four."

When they had gone McVitie closed the door behind them and turned to Shaw, his assistant.

"We needn't waste time here," he said. "It's through that door."

"Have you found anything?" Shaw asked.

"Yes. Come here and take these measurements down."

He hitched the curtain over a chair and set the lighted candle on the floor again. Kneeling down, he began to measure carefully with his tape, calling off the results. Shaw looked rather puzzled as he entered them in his note-book.

"What is it, Mr. McVitie?" he asked, when he had taken the last one.

"Stoop down beside me and you'll see."

There was a faint coating of dust on the polished floor behind the curtain, the accumulation of a day or two. It had been disturbed, and there were irregular, confused marks upon it. Toward the left side of the opening, some six inches from the face of the door, and nearly parallel with it, was the impress, blurred but unmistakable, of a naked foot.

CHAPTER III

McVITIE and Shaw now went into Pfeiffer's room. This was smaller than Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's, being deeper than its width, and there was only one window. The door was at the left-hand corner of the back wall; a washing-stand was next to it, and beyond was the bed with its head toward the window. The fireplace was in the middle of the partition wall between the two rooms; on one side of it was a chest of drawers, and on the other a wardrobe, to the right of which was the door leading into Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room. A curtain-rod was fixed over the door, but there was no curtain.

This door at once engaged McVitie's attention. He examined it carefully with his glass, but he found no trace of finger-marks. It was flush with the wall, and the floor in front of it, not being concealed by a curtain, had evidently been swept recently.

"Nothing there," he said.

Shaw, who was his confidential assistant, and had worked with him in several difficult cases, was in close touch with his thoughts, and was in the habit of discussing with him the problems which they had to solve.

"What do you make of it, Mr. McVitie?" he asked.

"The thief came through this room," McVitie answered in his slow, colorless drawl. "He may have hid behind the curtain before the lady went to bed; but he must have got off this way, because her door into the passage was found bolted inside this morning."

"One of the servants was in it, I suppose."

"Certain. I'm thinking one of the servants took it. I doubt if there was any outside expert working here."

"But isn't it too big a job for a servant? It wouldn't be easy to pass off a necklace like that."

"We can assume there's a crook outside waiting for it. But the actual theft seems to have been done from inside."

"What makes you say that? It'd be easy enough for any one to get away once he was out of the room."

"True. But you're overlooking an important point. We've proved that the man who took it had no shoes or stockings on. You can see the toe-mark plain. Now, an outsider would take his shoes off, but why should he take his stockings off?"

"Why should an insider?"

"I'd not expect it of him, I grant; but this man did. He'd have partly undressed before coming here, and in case of alarm he'd want to be back in bed as quick as he could."

Shaw still looked unconvinced, and after a minute's reflection he said:

"Isn't it a rather thin point, Mr. McVitie?"

"It's a thin point," McVitie agreed, somewhat reluctantly. "But it'll stand till we get something against it."

"Yes."

"If it was an expert, as you think, he'd not linger about the house, and he'd be likely to have an open window or door behind him. Go down and talk to the servants, and see if anything was amiss this morning. If I'm right it'll do no harm to let them think we're on a false track."

"Shall I go now?"

"Yes, and come back when you're finished. And if any one tells you a window was found open, we'll see him later; the right man won't speak the truth."

Left alone, McVitie sat down to think over the whole matter and to marshal the possibilities which he had to examine. Although he was too shrewd to prejudge a case on insufficient data, and always kept his mind wide open to receive the faintest impressions, he could not resist shaping a theory. His experience of jewel robberies had taught him that, almost invariably, a servant was implicated—either indirectly, by gossiping of what there was to be got; or directly, by giving information about the habits of the owners and providing a way of entrance and escape.

In this case the bolt on one side of the door between the two rooms had been undone beforehand, which was strongly suggestive of a servant's complicity. Later, during the night, the thief had got

in through Pfeiffer's room; or, at all events, supposing that he had been concealed between the curtain and the door, he had got out that way.

So far, McVitie conceded, there was nothing to show whether the actual thief was a servant or an expert. Shaw's argument that the game was too big for a servant was good; but, against this, there was the print of the naked foot. That did point to some one in the house. He got up and opened the door to look again at the footmark. Though blurred, it was definite enough to show that it had been made by a rather long, narrow foot. It suggested a man who was accustomed to wear neat boots. But after all, he reflected, it was not a clue upon which one could build much at the moment, and he turned again to the question of the thief's movements.

Undoubtedly, he passed through Pfeiffer's room, and his choice of exit lay between the door and the window. McVitie sat down on the window-seat and leant out. There was no ivy or creeper on the house and no water pipe within reach. The wall was of smooth stone, without foothold enough for a monkey. Beneath was a broad terrace, newly graveled. The heavy rain had prevented it from setting firmly, and even from that height a number of footmarks could be seen upon it.

"If he went this way," McVitie said, "he must have had a ladder, and the gravel will show that. It's an easier way than through the house and a favorite one with jewel thieves."

Shaw now returned and said:

"I've seen all the servants. The butler goes round the house the last thing, and everything was in order last night. The kitchen-maid and the under-footman open the house in the morning, and they say they found nothing unusual to-day. I asked them if they would have noticed a window open, and they declared they certainly would. They are positive there was nothing of the kind."

McVitie nodded.

"It looks as if you are right, Mr. McVitie, unless——" Shaw added, glancing at the window.

"I've thought of that. See, there's soft gravel below. Go down and try for a trace on it. There must have been a ladder; there's no foothold on the wall."

Shaw left the room, and a minute later he appeared on the terrace.

"Walk close under the wall," McVitie said, leaning out.

Shaw went down on his hands and knees and studied the ground carefully. Presently he raised his head, saying in a low voice:

"There are no footmarks just here under the window and no ladder has been pitched."

"Then he didn't go by the window."

"Shall I come up?"

"No. Walk around the back premises and see what ladders there are. Better make sure."

They had got, then, McVitie reflected, to this. The thief had bare feet and he made his exit

through Pfeiffer's room into the passage. If he lived in the house, his course was plain enough—he went back to bed, and during the morning he had had ample time to hide the necklace, or—more probably—to pass it to an accomplice outside.

McVitie had at first been inclined to favor this theory, but further consideration made him hesitate. The footprint in the dust was too large for a woman's, and there were only three male servants sleeping on the premises. Gibson, the butler, was an elderly man, and had a long record; and neither of the footmen were newcomers. A thief in a way of business large enough to take a necklace of such value would not go into service for two or three years on the chance of getting it; and besides, the necklace did not belong to one of the family, so the object was altogether too remote.

Then as to the other inmates. Of course, it was always possible that a guest might be a sharper in disguise, but here they seemed genuine enough. Fraser, the Benyons, and Miss Carew were all known to him by repute. Drury was a man in a good business position in London. And Pfeiffer was the usual type of harmless town loafer and had been intimate with the Vawdreys for a long time. For the moment, all of them might be disregarded, though he would, of course, have them looked up later.

After reviewing all the circumstances of the case, McVitie now swung over to the belief that an expert hand had done the business. Most prob-

ably, the necklace had been watched for some time, and this Scotch visit had been chosen as a good opportunity for getting it. A little love-making with one of the maids would prepare the way, a little persuasion brought to bear on a foolish, not over-scrupulous girl, and the thing was as good as done.

The closer consideration of this theory brought certain points into notice. The thief was well posted as to the house. He knew that there was a door between the two rooms, and he knew that the necklace was kept, apart from the other less valuable jewelry, on a shelf of the dressing-table. It might also be inferred that he knew that Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was a light sleeper; for, otherwise, what reason would be have had for escaping through Pfeiffer's room rather than through hers? In all probability, he concealed himself between the door and the curtain during the evening, for he would scarcely risk two journeys across Pfeiffer's room. The maid had tucked him in and unbolted the door on Pfeiffer's side while the guests were at dinner, or perhaps a little later.

The evidence of the kitchen-maid that no door or window had been found open in the morning went for nothing. Either she was the one implicated or, more probably, the thief had been let out and the window closed behind him.

McVitie found that this theory bore the test of examination fairly well, so far as his present information went. Moreover, it agreed with the

idea that the theft had been planned some time in advance, and carried out, as all such big thefts are, with simplicity and precision. If, as he suspected, the accomplice among the servants was Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's maid, the plot might have been hatching for months.

On the assumption that it was the work of a first-class jewel thief, immediate action was necessary outside the house. In such a thinly populated neighborhood a stranger would be noticed, and a thorough inquiry must be made. He would send Shaw out at once. With a haul of this size they would hardly risk a railway station; there ought to be news of a big motor-car seen, or heard, in the early hours of the morning.

McVitie's thoughts were interrupted by Shaw's return.

"There's a short ladder in the stable," he said, "and three more in an outhouse. I've looked at them all. There's no trace of gravel on the ends, which are quite dry; they can't have been used out of doors for several days. The outhouse and the stable are always locked up at night."

"Good. That settles it that the man escaped through the house with the connivance of a servant. And adding one thing to another, I think we'll find he's shown a clean pair of heels. I've come to think we're up against a professional."

"Have you found anything fresh?" Shaw asked eagerly.

"No; just thinking. You've got to act promptly,

while I stay here. Go round the village, see the constable and any one else handy, and pick up trace of a stranger. I'll be surprised if you don't hear of a fast-looking car."

"Very good."

"Ask the chauffeur to give you a ride in the motor; and if you get nothing in the village go on down the road for a few miles. You can report to me here; or, in your discretion, get through on the wire to Edinburgh—that is, if you get a description of a car."

"Very good."

"And as you go out tell Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's maid I want to see her up here."

CHAPTER IV

IN a few minutes Mademoiselle Céleste knocked at the door and came in. Although no longer hysterical, she was excited, and her big brown eyes gave promise of ready tears. A more pliant man than James McVitie might have prefaced his inquiries with some expression of sympathy, or even with a warmer tribute to her undeniable attractiveness, but his dry lips had never whispered soft words in a pretty ear and he had no intention of beginning now. To his annoyance, moreover, he found himself hampered by the fact that Céleste's English was about on a par with his own French, though infinitely more pleasant in sound; and after a futile effort to understand her, he rang the bell and asked if there was any one in the house who could act as interpreter.

Of all unlikely people, Gibson appeared. In his younger days he had been valet to a cosmopolitan millionaire, and had passed a good part of several years at a château near Tours.

"Can you speak French?" McVitie asked, with a look of sour surprise.

"Yes, sir. I understand you wish me to translate for the young person."

McVitie nodded. His thoughts had been dissipated, and it was a moment or two before he could collect them.

"Ask her when she saw the necklace last," he said at length.

"When Mrs. Dayrell-Wing went down to dinner last night, sir. She was wearing it."

"Did she remain in the room after that?"

"A few minutes only, sir."

"Did she come up here again afterward?"

"At about ten o'clock, to lay out Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's things for the night."

"Was any one with her?"

"No, sir."

"As far as she knows, no one was in the room then or later?"

"No, sir."

"Did she hear any one in this room?"

"No, sir."

"When did she first learn that the necklace was missing?"

A somewhat long conversation ensued between Céleste and Gibson, at the end of which he said:

"She brought Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's tea at eight o'clock, as usual. She was with her some time. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was much disturbed, sir, and at last she told her that the necklace had been stolen."

"H'm!"

McVitie considered a moment. Then he said abruptly:

"Ask her whether she's keeping company with any one."

Gibson's face became faintly pink, and he hesitated before he put the question into French. He was offended and rather shocked, for he did not think such a line of interrogation gentlemanly. Perhaps, too, his disinclination to serve McVitie's curiosity was partly due to his having condescended, from the height of his position as butler, to enter into a few pleasantries with Mademoiselle Céleste. At last, however, he translated, wrapping up the inquiry as politely as he could.

Céleste blushed very prettily, and gave him the full benefit of her eyes as she answered. Gibson, very erect and with a face of wood, explained:

"The young person, sir, says she has had affairs."

"Maintenant, avez-vous?" McVitie demanded.

Céleste laughed in his face, and said something to Gibson in rapid French which made his mouth twitch. Monsieur Gibson, at the château near Tours, had not always been so dignified as he was at Gains.

"What does she say?" McVitie demanded impatiently.

"I think, sir, if you'll excuse me," Gibson said, in his most episcopal manner, "that you will find this course of inquiry unprofitable. The young person is French."

McVitie was furious. He longed for a police interpreter, who would put the hussy in her place. He would get a warrant and have her remanded in custody for a week; that was what she wanted.

Outwardly, he remained calm, and it was only a flicker of his eyelids that betrayed his anger.

"I asked whether she was keeping company now with a young man," he said. "I want an answer."

Gibson, without referring again to Céleste, replied: "No, sir. No one in particular."

With a sour smile, which he meant to be agreeable, McVitie pressed the question.

"Surely, a young lady so good looking—there must be a friend."

After conference, Gibson said coldly:

"She is not engaged to be married, sir, if that is what you are asking."

"Then who gave her that ring?" McVitie asked suddenly, pointing to her left hand.

Gibson's translation seemed to touch "the young person" on the raw, for she fired up and poured out a torrent of words which seemed unending. Gibson, after listening for some time, waved to her to be silent; and, turning to McVitie, he said:

"She refuses to say, sir."

"Ah! Does she! And she took three minutes by the clock to tell you that. Just translate what she *did* say, please."

Gibson moved restlessly.

"Go on, sharp," McVitie rasped.

"She says, sir, she has no cause to answer questions of the sort. She is employed by Mrs. Daysell-Wing, who is satisfied with her, and such things as presents are her own business. She used very

insulting language toward you—quite impossible in English, sir."

"Ask her again who gave it to her," McVitie insisted. "If she persists in refusing to answer tell her I shall find a way to open her mouth which she won't like."

"She won't say, sir," Gibson repeated.

"Perhaps she will tell us when she received it?"

Mademoiselle Céleste met the question with a flick of words and a flash of scorn in her eyes. Gibson looked horrified at what she had said and cried:

"Tst! Tst!"

"She won't answer, sir," he added to McVitie.

"Very well. We can infer. Have you seen her carrying on with any one while she has been here?"

"No, sir," Gibson answered, drawing himself up. "A most respectable young person, I believe, sir."

"All right. You can take her away now, but I shall want her again later."

It looked promising, McVitie thought. The ring was doubtless the price she had received, and her denial that she was keeping company with any one left her without an explanation for having it. Gibson's testimony confirmed this view; for in the servants' hall there are no secrets, and he would have known if she had a recognized follower in London.

He sat for some time, reviewing various aspects of the case, and becoming more and more con-

vinced that the key of the mystery lay between the French maid and an expert London "crook" who had bent her to his purpose. It was an old story, so old that it was always surprising to find how gullible such women were.

It was after six when Shaw returned. McVitie's certainty voiced itself in the question:

"Have you got in touch with him?"

Shaw stood, turning his hat in his hand, and answered despondently:

"I can't make it out. There isn't a clue anywhere."

"Do you mean you've found nothing at all?"

"Nothing. I saw the constable here and the innkeepers and talked to several people. They haven't noticed any stranger anywhere near the village. As to a motor, they're all positive there hasn't been one. The place is off the main road, and except for the cars here it's very seldom one goes through."

"Did you go further?"

"Yes, several miles along. I questioned half a dozen people, but I couldn't pick up anything. Then I went to the station. There was no stranger on the early train this morning. They only issued two tickets, and they know who had them."

"H'm! That's curious. It isn't so easy to slip through."

"No, it's a puzzler. I made sure I'd hear something."

"I must take it up myself and leave you here,"

McVitie said decisively. "That French maid of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's is in it; keep your eye on her. With a little more evidence I shall apply for her arrest."

"Shall I have a talk to her?"

"Better not. She pretends she can't speak English, and I must get an official interpreter from headquarters."

"Is there anything else to do before your return?"

"Yes. Send in a complete list of names for examination, and tell them to warn London with full particulars. Before I go I'll just see Pfeiffer, as he's waiting for me. Bring him up, will you?"

CHAPTER V

McVITIE dropped into a chair and examined the bearings of the story once more while he was waiting. If he was on the right line, Pfeiffer would not have anything to say which was worth knowing; but he thought it better to see him before devoting himself to the trail outside the house, for that might carry him afield before he was able to return to Gains.

Plans and theories, however, as James McVitie knew better than most people, "gang aft a-gley," and the structure of facts and inferences which his logical brain had raised was about to be upset by a most unexpected piece of information. The information was unexpected, not because it was absolutely incredible; but because, knowing as much as he did, it was beyond hope that he would ever obtain it.

When Pfeiffer came in, accompanied by Shaw, McVitie favored him with one of his awkward nods, in which a protest against any form of civility seemed to be the chief ingredient.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Pfeiffer," he said.

"Certainly. I'm at your service."

Thus launched, McVitie seemed in no hurry to continue, and a long pause ensued, during which his expressionless eyes played ceaselessly upon Pfeiffer. He knew his class, and he had no respect

for it—an idle, luxurious class, though not a criminal one.

In placing Willie Pfeiffer thus McVitie was scarcely doing him justice; for, although he was always in debt, and was not overscrupulous in dealing with his creditors, he was kind-hearted and singularly free from the meaner forms of vice. A German by birth, he would have passed for an Englishman. He wore English clothes, very well cut, and his appearance conformed in all particulars to the smart London standard. He had very good manners, and every one liked him. Indeed, he depended on this for his living, for he had no profession, and his income was derived from the commissions which he earned by introducing clients to a firm of stock brokers. A century ago he might have been called an adventurer, but opinion now is more tolerant; and shares, motors, and other commodities are the recognized means of support for young gentlemen of good family and pleasing address. He was, in fact, a product of his age, with the easiest code of morals, and a strong objection to sitting in judgment upon any one. He knew everybody, from old Lady Catskill, who sent him an occasional card for a missionary At Home, to Roy Phillides, who had lost three fortunes on the turf and was known as the professional co-respondent.

"I believe, Mr. Pfeiffer," Mr. McVitie began at last, "that you slept in this room last night?"

"Yes."

"You heard nothing suspicious, I suppose? You were not disturbed?"

"No. I don't think I woke once."

"Did you come to bed at the same time as Mrs. Dayrell-Wing?"

"A few minutes after. We were dancing last night and were all rather late. When the ladies retired we went into the billiard-room, and I had a whiskey and soda and a cigarette; but I wasn't there more than a quarter of an hour."

"In that case Mrs. Dayrell-Wing would still be undressing when you came up?"

"Undoubtedly, I should think."

"Did you go straight to bed?"

"Yes, at once."

"Have you a servant? Was he here with you?"

"I haven't one. The footman valets me."

"He wasn't in the room last night?""

"Not when I went to bed. I suppose he was here earlier in the evening."

"Which footman attends to you?"

"Tipton."

"Do you know which maid waits on you?"

"I haven't an idea. I've never seen one in the room at all."

"After you came up last night, did you leave your room at any time until you went down to breakfast this morning?"

"No. I have my bath here. This morning Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's maid brought me a note, and later Mr. Vawdrey came to see me; but I did not leave the room."

"Not for a moment?"

"No."

There was a pause. Then McVitie turned to the door which led into Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room, saying:

"This door is bolted, as you see. There is a bolt on the other side, which is not shot; so one can open it from this side."

"I suppose so."

"Have you ever seen it open since you've been here?"

"Never."

"You have never, by chance, opened it yourself?"

Pfeiffer frowned.

"My good sir," he said, "I can assure you that my acquaintance with Mrs. Dayrell-Wing is much too slight to justify my walking into her bedroom. I think I have once dined at her flat, and I have met her at other people's houses; but I certainly should not count her among my friends."

"Ah!"

"What are you driving at?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to hear if you had opened the door; you might have done so, thinking it was a cupboard."

Pfeiffer did not answer, and McVitie added, rather dryly:

"I take it, then, that you hardly noticed there *was* a door?"

"I knew it was there, of course."

"But you wouldn't have noticed, for example,

whether it was bolted when you went to bed last night?"

"No, I didn't notice."

McVitie paused again, asking himself whether there were any other questions to put to Pfeiffer. The only point on which his evidence might have been valuable was as to whether the bolt on his side of the door had been fastened, and of this he was not sure. While McVitie was making up his mind to get rid of him, Pfeiffer broke in upon his thoughts, saying:

"I gather that you think the burglar must have come through my room while I was asleep?"

"That is fairly certain," McVitie assented. "Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's door was bolted inside when she woke this morning."

"So was mine," Pfeiffer said. "Then he must have got away by the window; it was wide open."

McVitie looked up suddenly. He had been sprawling in an armchair, and throughout the interview he had seemed to be bored and rather tired. Now his lassitude disappeared in a flash and his whole figure became keenly alive.

"What's that?" he asked sharply. "You say your door was bolted?"

"Yes. I bolted it because some of the party had been playing wretched jokes, and I didn't want them bursting in on me in the middle of the night."

"You are quite sure it was bolted last night?"

"Quite."

"Thank you. That will do."

CHAPTER VI

AS the door closed behind Pfeiffer, McVitie and Shaw turned and looked at each other.

"Why did he let it out?" Shaw exclaimed.

"We needn't answer that," McVitie said slowly, "until we've been over that bit of gravel inch by inch."

"I wouldn't have missed it."

"We'll make sure."

They locked up the room and went downstairs and out through the hall door on to the terrace. Rain had been falling again, and the new gravel scrunched under their feet. McVitie stopped and looked at the impression made by his boot; then he bent down and tried the gravel with his thumb.

"It's as soft as cheese," he said.

"There's been a lot of walking up and down. Look how the marks are trodden over."

The terrace extended from one end of the house to the other and was about twenty feet broad. It was surrounded with three shallow steps of granite, and large stone vases were placed at intervals along the top of the steps. The gravel was fine and free from pebbles, and it had been spread about an inch deep over the older surface. At the far corner a garden roller was standing, and a man was in the act of pulling it forward. McVitie and Shaw walked quickly toward him, keeping on the stone step.

"You are going to roll the gravel?" McVitie asked.

"Yes."

"You might leave it for to-day."

"Are you the detective from Edinburgh?" the man asked.

"Yes. Is the gravel only just laid?"

"A few days since. It was late coming; it was ordered for a fortnight ago."

"Was it rolled yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And this morning?"

"No. I've no time in the morning."

"I'm obliged to you."

McVitie and Shaw turned away and walked back till they came to Pfeiffer's window.

"Get a stick," McVitie said, "and mark off ten feet on either side of here and ten feet from the wall outward."

When this had been done he knelt down and began to examine the impressions on the gravel. On the outer side of the terrace there were a great number of footmarks mingled together and overlapping; for there had been no shooting to-day and the party had taken advantage of an interval between the showers to get a little exercise by walking up and down. All the footprints were parallel to the house, and could easily be followed beyond the limits which Shaw had drawn.

Nearer in there were only a few marks, and these were also parallel to the house, as if made by

two people walking together, somewhat apart from the others. They were plainly discernible—a man's heavy boots with broad soles and a girl's pointed shoes.

McVitie went closer to the house and lay prone on the gravel, but under the window he could find no marks of any kind. Not only were there no traces of a ladder having been set up, but there were no footprints save those of the two people who had walked the length of the terrace.

He stood up at last and brushed his clothes with his hand, saying curtly:

"This is a hot thing. There was no ladder."

They went indoors again and returned to Pfeiffer's room. McVitie wanted to think. He wanted to get rid of his body, which was tired, and hang it up somewhere like an overcoat, so as to set his mind absolutely free. He sat down in an armchair, with his feet on the sofa, and lighted a long, thin cigar. Shaw, recognizing his mood, retreated to the window-seat and remained there in silence.

McVitie smoked his cigar down to the butt before he spoke. Then, without turning his head, he began as if talking to himself:

"This is where we've got to. When the theft was discovered the woman's door was bolted inside and Pfeiffer's door was bolted inside; so no one could have got out of either room into the passage. The woman's windows were closed at the bottom. She's a light sleeper, she says, so

any one trying to get out that way would have woke her."

Shaw said nothing, and McVitie presently went on:

"Pfeiffer's window was open. Any one could have got out that way without waking him. But he couldn't have climbed the wall, and he didn't use a ladder, and he didn't let himself drop. It's plain enough from the state of the gravel that no one has been under the window for at least twenty-four hours, because it hasn't been rolled since yesterday afternoon. Then there's the mark of the naked foot on the boards. That suggests that the thief was living in the house. It goes to confirm, also, that the necklace was really stolen, and that this is not a fraud got up by the woman for the sake of the insurance money."

He paused again and remained silent for some minutes before he continued:

"We have proved, then, that no one could have got into these two rooms, or out of them, either by the passage doors or by the windows. The robbery was discovered this morning, and the rooms were searched by Vawdrey before they were left empty. And no one was found concealed in them."

Shaw had moved forward and was now standing in front of McVitie. His eyes narrowed slightly and he said in a quick, low tone:

"It's a clear case. But why did he tell us his door was bolted?"

"It's a clear case—against Pfeiffer. And it may

explain why you found no clue on the road. But until we trace the necklace to him there isn't evidence to arrest him on."

"But it can't be far away," Shaw said, glancing round the room.

"He may have passed it during the day; we don't know where he's been. If he has passed it, there's an accomplice outside; but you didn't hear of one."

"I might have missed it; I didn't have much time. I would rather have suspected an accomplice."

"No. Take it this way. Pfeiffer is either a tip-top expert come here for the purpose or just a thief on a sudden temptation—pressed for money and seeing a way out under his hand. If he's an expert, he'll know the danger of having any one hanging about in a country village, a mark for all eyes, and he'd sooner risk keeping the stuff by him or in some hiding-place. If he's a new hand, it goes without saying he's working alone; and if we don't land him now we shall have another chance later when he tries to sell it."

"Do you think he's a new hand?"

"I incline to it. He told us his door was bolted and suggested the window, forgetting about the gravel below. That was clumsy."

"Suppose he'd passed it before he said that. It wouldn't be a bad card to play if he knew the necklace was safe."

"Dangerous. Only a very clever crook would

risk it. In any case, we'll work first on the theory that he's a new hand and we'll search this room."

He stood up and was taking off his coat when there was a knock at the door. Shaw opened it and found Mrs. Pannell, the housekeeper, with some of the maids.

"I hope I'm not intruding, sir," Mrs. Pannell said, "but orders have been given to prepare two other rooms for Mrs. Dayrell-Wing and Mr. Pfeiffer. Can the maids move their things, for it's getting near time to dress for dinner?"

McVitie fingered his moustache for a moment before he answered. He could not have Pfeiffer's room disturbed before it had been searched, but, at the same time, he did not want to do anything to put the man on his guard.

"It's a little inconvenient at present," he drawled. "We are writing up our notes. But we've finished with the lady's room."

"Then can we take her things first and come again for Mr. Pfeiffer's?"

"You can clear out her room, but we shall be some time here."

"Then suppose we take just an evening suit and the toilet articles and leave the rest till after dinner?"

"Yes, you can do that."

He stood by while Mrs. Pannell opened the wardrobe and laid out the clothes, with a shirt, socks, ties, and handkerchief. He passed his hands lightly over the suit, to make sure that there

was nothing in the pockets, and then allowed the maids to take it. They took also, under Mrs. Pannell's directions, the brushes, razors, and other necessary articles from the dressing-table.

When they had gone McVitie turned to Shaw, saying:

"Follow along and conceal yourself where you can watch him change his clothes. He may have the stuff on him."

Left alone, McVitie began a thorough examination of the room. He opened every drawer and cupboard, took out the clothes and put them neatly back again, or ran his hands deftly among them. He looked on the top of the wardrobe and behind the pictures, tapped the floor for a loose board and explored a ruck in the carpet; moved the furniture, dug his fingers into the cushions and shook out the curtains. Then, stripping off the cretonne covers, he ripped up the bottoms of the upholstered chairs and the sofa and peered among the springs. Last of all, he attacked the bed, going over the pillows inch by inch and opening the mattress.

He found nothing, and at each successive failure the frown on his forehead deepened; for he felt that, if Pfeiffer was an amateur, the necklace must almost certainly be hidden in the room. It was so unlikely that he would risk being seen putting it anywhere about the house or burying it in the garden.

Then, was Shaw's suggestion right? Was Pfeiffer a criminal of the first rank, a master-mind

who had planned and carried out a daring robbery? Had he got rid of the spoil without leaving a stain on his hands? If so, he probably knew exactly what was happening in his room and was enjoying the joke. McVitie was not addicted to strong language, but the possibility brought a snarling oath to his lips.

He sat down to think the matter over once more. There seemed no solution except the one which he shrank from accepting—that Pfeiffer was an expert, and had passed the necklace to a confederate in waiting outside or had hidden it in some place prepared beforehand. Even now, after his vain search, he would not believe this; but when Shaw returned, saying that he had seen Pfeiffer undress and that the necklace was not on him, he was forced to accept the theory as probable. A handful of diamonds cannot disappear; and given that Pfeiffer had stolen them, and that they were not now in his possession, the influence was too strong to be resisted. Unfortunately, Shaw had failed to pick up a clue outside, and it was now too late to do much until the morning.

"You'd better go down to the village again and make further inquiries," he said. "And go to the post office. Ask if any small parcels have been sent off to-day and by whom. But wait a few minutes first."

Still dallying with the idea that Pfeiffer was a new hand, and that the necklace could not be far off, McVitie crossed the room and examined the

fireplace. Rolling his shirtsleeve up as far as it would go, he thrust his arm up the chimney and felt carefully round for anything which might be lodged there. A shower of soot and crumbling mortar was his only reward; and as he withdrew his blackened arm the door opened and Vawdrey came in.

"Hullo! What are you doing?" he asked.

"Searching," McVitie answered brusquely, being now thoroughly out of temper.

"Have you found anything?"

"A good deal."

"The necklace?"

"Not yet."

Vawdrey smiled.

"Well, that's an important item. But I suppose you mean you've got a clue?"

"Yes. I know who took it. We want further evidence before we arrest."

"I congratulate you. Come and see me after dinner—I'm late now. You'll find me in the study."

McVitie turned to Shaw and said in a disgusted tone:

"He'll think I'm an idiot because I can't take Pfeiffer off to prison. They always do—fules!"

CHAPTER VII

THE gaiety of the house-party had been abated by the theft of the necklace, and the jokes and laughter of the previous day had given place to eager conversation. Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, who was saved from a state of collapse by the remembrance of her insurance policy, was the centre of interest; and she had already told her story, or fragments of it, not less than a dozen times. It was vexatious, she felt, that Arthur Drury should be involved in the loss; but she consoled herself with the thought that it was a matter of business, and that in business people balanced the losses against the profits. Besides, he would not exactly lose the money, if things turned out as she intended them to do.

Drury's absence deepened the shadow which had fallen upon the party, for he and Pfeiffer had been the ringleaders in getting up amusements. Without him, Pfeiffer seemed depressed and disinclined for anything more exciting than a game of snooker. As for Fraser and Sir Charles, they were, at the best of times, somewhat lethargic. Dinner, therefore, promised to be a gloomy meal; and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, with her fine instinct for suitability in dress, put on a black frock and made up in a paler tint than usual.

But before the soup was finished the table was

electrified by Vawdrey's announcement that McVitie had a clue. Conversation sprang up as suddenly and as violently as a cyclone, and speculations and questions passed from mouth to mouth. With characteristic disregard of the servants' presence, the household staff was passed in review, for every one held to the belief that some one in the house was guilty. Mrs. Vawdrey had never wavered in her suspicion of the second footman, though, as he was listening, she refrained from mentioning him by name. Lady Benyon, less discreet, declared her invariable distrust of lady's maids; until Fraser, wishing to give the conversation a lighter turn, suggested that Gibson should amuse the company by confessing on the spot.

Vawdrey was grateful for the diversion and cut in:

"You're all talking nonsense. I'll lay a hundred to one in sovereigns that none of you have ever seen or heard of the thief. This is a very clever job, and, with the greatest respect for Gibson, I'm bound to say I don't think he's equal to it—eh, Gibson?"

"I don't think I am, sir," Gibson announced, with a slight relaxation of the lips, the nearest approach to a smile which his sense of decorum allowed when on duty.

"I'll take you," Sir Charles cried. "I'd take a hundred to one about anything. It's a sportin' risk, even when the horse has only three legs and a swinger."

"But you'll tell us who it is as soon as you know, won't you, Mr. Vawdrey?" Hilda Carew said.

"Rather. I'm going to have a talk with our Scotch friend after dinner, and subject to the interests of justice you shall be told. So get your money ready, Sir Charles."

Pfeiffer had spent the greater part of the day in conversation with Ethel. For him, at all events, the hours should have passed happily enough; but, although he did not fail in tenderness, she thought him rather out of spirits. He was, in fact, keenly apprehensive lest the prize which was so near his grasp should be withheld from him, and this prevented him from unfettered enjoyment of the very real pleasures of the moment.

Though he was genuinely in love with her, he knew that he would not have asked her to marry him if she had not been an heiress, for love in a cottage had no attractions for his educated mind. As it was, she suited him exactly. She was the woman he wanted, and her fortune not only made a marriage possible, but promised him relief from financial anxieties in the future.

Thus, knowing his own point of view too well to admit of self-deception, and knowing also that he was one among many suitors, he looked forward with anything but pleasure to the necessary interview with her father. Vawdrey was "one of the best" and had not an atom of social ambition, but that need not prevent him from having rooted ideas as to the kind of son-in-law he preferred, and

Pfeiffer was aware that, as he put it to Ethel, "on paper he was not even a starter." She had encouraged him, but he felt extremely nervous when he touched Vawdrey on the arm as they left the dining-room, and asked if he might see him in the study.

"Yes, come along," Vawdrey said genially. "But stop—I'd better see the detective first. Come in half an hour."

Pfeiffer, accordingly, followed the other men into the drawing-room, while Vawdrey went to meet McVitie.

McVitie's disinclination for an interview was not much inferior to Pfeiffer's. He was thoroughly out of humor, in a smouldering Scotch rage, for the facts of the case, as he now had them, showed that the robbery had been planned by a master mind. Doubtless, the necklace was well on its way to the Continent, and there was small chance either of recovering it or of convicting the thief. Worse still, Pfeiffer knew that there was no proof against him strong enough to justify action, and he was playing the game of innocence—playing it, too, with remarkable ability. It was a clever stroke for him to say that his door was locked, practically a challenge—"Yes, I took it. Prove it if you can."

And McVitie could not prove it. No jury would convict on the simple statement that no one else could have got into the room; that was all very well in melodrama, but it would not do in court.

Pfeiffer was as safe as the Bank of Scotland. There was still, of course, the bare chance that they might pick up an accomplice, and he had again sent out Shaw to scour the district. But there was nothing to go upon, unless he could get his description from some one who had seen him, and so far Shaw had failed in this.

Altogether, therefore, McVitie felt that things were at a deadlock, and jealousy for his professional reputation made him acutely sensitive to amateur comment. Vawdrey, like the rest of the public, would not appreciate the difficulties of the case, and would think that a detective who could not get evidence enough to arrest his man was a blunderer.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting," Vawdrey said as he entered. "Will you have a cigar?"

"I'll not smoke, thank you," McVitie answered stiffly.

"No? Well, what have you found out?"

"We're up against an expert hand here," McVitie began, slowly and reluctantly.

"That means he hasn't found out much," Vawdrey said to himself.

"The question is, whose hand?" he said aloud.

"No. That isn't the question."

"Then whose was it? I've laid a hundred to one that I sha'n't know it when I see it."

"You've lost."

Vawdrey looked at him sharply. The good-natured smile which was usually in his eyes gave

place to the keen light of successful mercantile shrewdness.

"Tell me what you know," he said.

"We've proved," McVitie began, in his irritating, slow, sing-song voice. "We've proved that no one got in or out of either room during the night. Both the doors were bolted on the inside and were found bolted this morning."

"Well, well. But the windows?"

"The windows are eighteen feet from the ground. There is no rain-pipe or ivy to give a foothold and no ladder was used."

"How do you know that?"

"The gravel is new and soft. Under the windows there are no marks on it, either from a ladder or from feet."

"Then some one got in beforehand and concealed himself in the rooms."

"How did he get out?"

"H'm!"

"I'm told they were searched."

"Yes, they were, this morning."

"Before they were left vacant?"

"Yes. I searched them myself."

"Then, as no one got in or out——"

"What do you mean?" Vawdrey cried sharply, a ring almost of pain in his voice as he caught the drift of McVitie's story.

"I say, no one got in or out——"

"Pfeiffer! Good heavens!" Vawdrey exclaimed in a horrified tone. "I can't believe it."

"From what you told me, you don't know much about him," McVitie answered. His cold eyes faintly expressed the grim pleasure of the logician who is driving his opponent into a corner.

"Know much about him! But he's well known in London, goes everywhere; there isn't a thing against him."

"As far as you have heard."

"Well, yes, as far as I have heard. But those things *are* heard. Surely a man can't go on unsuspected for years if he's a burglar. Something would be bound to come out—some whisper."

"Then how was it done?" McVitie asked aggressively.

Vawdrey was silent. He liked Pfeiffer, and he had an idea that Ethel liked him; but the case certainly looked black. And, after all, what did he know of him except that he was a very pleasant fellow? What does one know of half the people one asks to dinner? Still, he would not believe McVitie's story without proof.

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" he asked.

"I am."

"I mean about the gravel. It's rolled every day."

"It's not been rolled since last evening. You can ask the gardener, and you can come and see it for yourself if you like."

"I will," Vawdrey said, getting up. "We can take a lantern."

They went out together, and found the gravel

as McVitie had said. The gardener, sent for, confirmed that it had not been rolled since the previous day. When they had returned to the study and the door was shut Vawdrey turned to McVitie and asked:

"What do you propose to do?"

"Nothing."

"But the necklace must be recovered."

"H'm! He had all the morning to get rid of it and he's got rid of it. My man saw him undress and turn his pockets out; it wasn't on him and it isn't in his room."

"Then what has become of it?"

"It's possible he may have hidden it, but more likely he had an accomplice waiting. My man's out now, trying to find a trace."

"You don't think it was taken in a sudden access of temptation on the spur of the moment?"

"I did think so until I searched his room. When I couldn't find it I knew it was a plot."

"If you are so certain, why not charge him with it? We can have him in now. He might compromise by giving it up if no steps were taken."

McVitie shook his head.

"There's no evidence to convict on and he knows that. He'd only deny everything. A criminal of that class is the best actor in the world."

"But some effort must be made."

"No. Let him think he isn't suspected and we'll shadow him. In case he has hidden it he'll

be watched here, and in London we can find out what company he keeps."

"Bah! It's perfectly detestable!" Vawdrey cried.

McVitie took no notice of his outburst and went on in an even tone:

"You can give out that we're on the track and expect to make an arrest in a day or two. Head Pfeiffer away from thinking he's suspected or watched. I'll leave to-morrow, but my man will stay about here."

Vawdrey threw up his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Very well," he said, "if that's what has to be. I should like to get rid of Pfeiffer, though."

"There's no harm in that. If the diamonds are hidden, he'll have to fetch them; and if not, the sooner he reaches London the sooner we'll have a chance of learning who his friends are."

Vawdrey threw his cigar into the grate and walked up and down the room. He was very much distressed, for he had always liked Pfeiffer and he had noticed Ethel's inclination toward him without more displeasure than a father usually feels in such circumstances. But he was too clear-headed to disbelieve McVitie's story, which brought the theft home to Pfeiffer with simple and logical exactness. If McVitie had been a flowery talker he would have doubted his conclusions, but his dispassionate coldness carried conviction with his words.

In a last effort to find a breach in the argument he said:

"You are absolutely sure of your facts—that the doors were bolted and that no entry could have been made through the windows?"

"I am. If you had not searched the rooms this morning before they were left it might have been that some one was hidden and got away later."

"I searched them myself, so I know that's not right. Besides, there are precious few places where a man could hide in them."

"Just so."

"Well, I suppose you're right. But it's terribly upsetting; and, of course, unless you can bring it home to him and recover the necklace it's not very satisfactory from my point of view."

"I'm sorry, you're dissatisfied," McVitie said, with a flash of hostility. "I've done as much as was possible."

"Oh, quite so. But you must follow the matter up; no expense is to be spared. And let me know what you find out."

McVitie rose and took his leave without further remark. On the whole, he felt that he had adequately defended his reputation and had kept Vawdrey, as one of the public, in his place.

Vawdrey was left alone with his very unpleasant thoughts. It was odious to him to have a thief in his house, the more so when it was a man whom he had trusted and liked and had often helped. He knew that Pfeiffer was not well off, and from

time to time he made a point of giving him orders in stocks, so that he might get a share of the commission. Once he had lent him two hundred pounds.

And now, if McVitie was right, the man had committed a theft, not on a sudden temptation, but deliberately. He was a practised thief, a Raffles, a scoundrel who used his position as a gentleman for the purpose of robbing his friends. It was horrible—horrible—and Vawdrey made up his mind to seek some pretext for getting him out of the house as soon as possible.

CHAPTER VIII

HALF an hour passed. Vawdrey was still thinking over McVitie's story when there was a tap at the door and Pfeiffer entered, saying:

"May I come in?"

Vawdrey started. He had forgotten that Pfeiffer had asked to speak to him; but now, in a flash, he guessed the reason. He wanted to confess. Then, after all, he *had* taken the necklace under stress of temptation, and he wanted to make restitution. His evident nervousness confirmed the idea, and Vawdrey said in a voice which was not unkindly:

"Oh, come in. Do you want to tell me something?"

Pfeiffer sat down, saying in a hesitating tone:

"Well, yes, I——"

"Thank heaven, he's going to make a clean breast of it," Vawdrey thought. "I'll get him out somehow if I can. It's awful; but I suppose he was tempted beyond his powers and was caught in a weak moment."

"Yes?" he said. "Let's hear all about it."

Pfeiffer still hesitated, and Vawdrey, to encourage him, added:

"Look here, Willie, I've been a good friend to you before and you'll find me a good friend again. If there's any way through I'll try to help you."

"You're awfully kind," Pfeiffer broke out. "You *have* been a good friend; but I haven't asked you for anything so big before, and I admit I'm in a devilish funk."

Vawdrey's face was very grave, but his bitterness against Pfeiffer had vanished. It was true that what he had done was inexcusable—far too serious to be overlooked—and he would have to leave England and begin life again in another country. But, in spite of that, Vawdrey's pity was aroused, for he read in the pale face and halting words the signs of a genuine repentance. Life had taught him to make large allowances for a man who is tempted; he knew how easy it was to be wise after the event, to be strong when the use of strength no longer avails. It was not in him to add to the punishment for a crime of temporary aberration, and he did not mean to burden Pfeiffer with homilies and reproaches. On the contrary, if it were possible, he would help him to restore the necklace and get out of the country quietly.

"You'd better get it over," he said, after waiting for a minute. "I can't do anything unless you speak out."

"Well, I—as you know, I'm infernally hard up and always have been; so I needn't go into that. All the same, I feel bound to say that I haven't looked on this as a relief scheme, so please don't accuse me of that."

Vawdrey leant forward in his chair and looked at him sternly. If the man was going to blither

about excuses he had done with him. Confessions which were worth anything did not begin on that note.

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked curtly.

"I mean, I'm not a fortune-hunter. And in asking your permission to marry Ethel——"

"What!" Vawdrey shouted. The color of his face had deepened to a dull red, and his eyes were fixed upon Pfeiffer with a threatening glare. Pfeiffer's words so shocked him that he was scarcely able to believe that he had heard aright.

Before the sudden change from friendly encouragement to hostility Pfeiffer's nervousness returned upon him with redoubled force. But he was not lacking in courage, and the expression of fury and disgust on Vawdrey's face spurred him to make an effort in his own defence.

"I am asking your consent to marry Ethel," he said, drawing himself up stiffly.

Vawdrey's hands clenched, and his mouth fell half open in a snarl of rage. For a moment he paused, because he would not speak until he had full control of himself. Then, very slowly and carefully, he said:

"You are asking my consent to marry my daughter? You have the impudence to come here tonight and ask me that? Good God! I wouldn't have believed it of you."

A quick flush of anger crossed Pfeiffer's face, and he sprang up and backward as if Vawdrey had smitten him on the cheek.

"What do you mean?" he stammered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say," Vawdrey answered, rubbing in every word like salt into a wound. "I've liked you and I've trusted you; and I've found it hard to believe ill of you. But this caps everything."

Pfeiffer's rage waxed still hotter.

"You intend to insult me?" he said. "Very well. Your age, and the fact that I am a guest in your house, will protect you from punishment, as you perfectly well know. But, if I can't knock you down, I can say what I think of you. There's only one word for you—you're a cad, and one of the vilest."

Vawdrey was about to retort when Pfeiffer broke in, his voice shaken with passion.

"Who *are* you? Perhaps you've forgotten, but other people haven't, and I promise you they won't. You're a working man—a fellow who ought to be carrying a hod—and because you've been lucky in speculating and swindling you tell me I'm impudent for wishing to marry your daughter! Well, if you're looking for a duke I advise you to learn manners first, or he won't swallow you."

Vawdrey stood up. Pfeiffer's foolish taunts failed to rouse him, for he was too sick and disgusted to lose his temper.

"Have you finished?" he asked.

"Yes, I have," Pfeiffer shouted.

"Then listen to me. When you came into the

room I thought you had something very different to say, and I was prepared to help you as far as I was able. I was mistaken, as I have been mistaken all along about you. You have deceived me and every one else so successfully that I daresay you are clever enough to get off now, though I hope you won't. All that I need do is to ask you to leave here by the first train to-morrow morning."

Pfeiffer's hands were itching to hit Vawdrey, for his insulting words cut him to the quick; but he restrained himself and answered more calmly:

"I shall certainly do so. I wouldn't stay here to-night if I could avoid it. It may surprise you, but I don't care to be in the house of a man who has not the common instincts of decency."

"Nor do I," Vawdrey shot at him glimly.

Pfeiffer left the room and went to find Ethel, who was waiting for him in the hall. He was possessed by one thought—with or without her fortune he would marry her. That was the essential thing, and at any cost he must achieve it. The loss of the money would be a blow, a very serious one; but that should not stop him. Even if he had not cared for her he would at that moment have married her for the sake of revenging himself upon her father, for it was the only way in which he could repay him amply. As he crossed the hall he braced himself for the interview with her. He knew that it would require all his tact and power of persuasion; and if he was to succeed he must hold himself well in hand.

She looked up as she heard his step, and the color left her face as she caught sight of the heavy frown on his forehead. She sprang toward him, holding out her hands and crying:

"Dear! What has happened?"

He drew her down beside him on the sofa, saying:

"Darling, I've had a very unpleasant ten minutes. I can't very well tell you what happened, because if I did I should have to say things about your father which you could not listen to."

"Willie!"

"As far as I can gather, though he did not put it into words, he has more ambitious ideas for you, and he was polite enough to say that he regarded my proposal as impudent."

"Father said that? Oh, you must have misunderstood him. He couldn't have meant such a thing. Why, he likes you—I know he does; and he's often said I'm to marry whom I like so long as he's respectable."

"Then he seems to have changed his mind. He insulted me intentionally and quite needlessly, for, if he wanted to refuse his consent, it was just as easy to do it civilly. Instead of that, he told me to clear out of the house to-morrow morning by the first train."

The tears sprang into Ethel's eyes, and she threw her arms round his neck, crying:

"How could he! How could he!"

Then, drawing away from him, she added in a calmer voice:

"Oh, Willie, you *must* have misunderstood him."

"He took care to make that impossible."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Do? I shall leave before breakfast. And if you'll come with me, dearest, I sha'n't much regret what has happened."

Ethel left off dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief and looked at him doubtfully.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I must think. It's all so extraordinary. If father was a cross, curmudgeony person I could understand it; but he isn't. He's always perfectly sweet to me."

"I can't make it out, either. When I went in he was awfully nice, but directly I mentioned you he turned on me like a savage, and said he thought I'd come for something different. I'm sure I don't know what he expected me to ask for."

If Ethel had been stupid, or had been on less friendly terms with her father, she might have yielded to Pfeiffer's entreaties and eloped with him. But she was no fool; and as she thought over his story, she felt sure that there was a mistake somewhere which could be put right. She would see her father and ask him what had happened before she decided what to do.

"I shall go to him," she said at last, getting up. "There must be some reason, and I'm entitled to know what it is. Wait here."

Pfeiffer laid his hand on her arm. He certainly did not want her to see her father just then, when it was important that his own influence should be paramount.

"No, don't go," he said. "It isn't a bit of use, darling. Don't go, I beg of you. Don't let's waste the short time we've got. Give me a chance to plead with you for myself while I can."

She touched his sleeve, saying very tenderly: "You needn't do that."

"Then, will you come with me to-morrow?" he asked eagerly. "Dearest, you'll be horribly poor, but we'll manage somehow, and I'll try to make it up to you by loving you ever so much more for your pluck and sweetness. I can't let you go, I can't, I can't."

"I *must* see father," she persisted gently. "If he has any real reason against it he will tell me and I will judge for myself."

Pfeiffer saw that it was useless to make further attempts to prevent her. She had a decided will, and he knew from her voice that her mind was made up.

"Very well,'" he said in a quieter tone. "I'll wait here for you."

She put her face up to his and he bent down and kissed her. Then she crossed the hall and opened the study door.

Pfeiffer watched her go.

"That settles it," he muttered. "That's the last chance gone. If only I could have kept her here."

He began to walk up and down. He had fallen into the depths of depression, for he knew that Ethel was very fond of her father and mother and that she would shrink from running counter to them in so serious a matter. He doubted whether her love was strong enough to make her do so; and, after what had passed, it was impossible for Vawdrey to give his consent even in the most grudging form. If Ethel married him it meant a definite quarrel with her parents.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Ethel entered the study Vawdrey was writing a letter. He looked up quickly, and she noted the stern lines of his mouth and the shadow in his eyes. She went to the back of the big writing-table and stood there facing him with her hands resting upon it. He leant back and looked at her, waiting for her to speak.

"Father," she said, "why have you refused your consent to Willie?"

For a moment Vawdrey did not answer. He was very sore at the thought that a scoundrel like Pfeiffer had wormed his way into her heart and was to darken her life. Such efforts had been made to shelter her from unhappiness; but she, no less than any other, was to learn the meaning of tragedy.

At length he said, in a voice which was not quite steady: "Little daughter, you must try and forget. It is a lesson which I hoped you would never have to learn."

"I can't take that answer," she said gently. "I must know your reason for turning against him. He says it's because you want me to make a brilliant match, but I don't believe that."

Vawdrey looked at her.

"Won't you trust me?" he asked.

"I do. And yet I can't in this."

"Dear, the reason isn't mine to give—yet. Soon, I hope, there will be no need for secrecy."

Ethel shook her head, and a slow smile touched her lips as she answered:

"You can't do it. It isn't fair and straight to ask me to break with Willie, to agree in turning him out of the house, without giving a reason. There *is* one, and I'm entitled to know it."

"There is one, and I think you're entitled to know it; but at the moment I can't tell it."

She clasped her hands together, the first sign of agitation which she had given, and turned away. After a minute's thought, and a hasty brushing away of the tears which had gathered in her eyes, she faced her father again and said:

"Father, you must tell me. I have promised to marry him, and I will not break my promise without a good reason. If you—if you won't tell me I am bound to keep it, and I *shall* keep it."

Vawdrey was a shrewd man and a good judge of character, and he knew his own daughter too well to deceive himself about her resolution. Unless he told her what had been discovered she *would* marry Pfeiffer, and the additional evidence which McVitie was trying to get might come too late to prevent her.

"Do you mean," he said, "that you will marry him at once?"

"Yes. He has asked me to go with him to-morrow morning. He says you have made it impos-

sible for him to stay here, or to see you again, and he wants to take me away."

Vawdrey's mouth hardened. He was quick to catch the drift of Pfeiffer's suggestion: Ethel was to be a hostage.

"And would you do that," he asked, "in the face of my express disapproval?"

The tears rushed into her eyes again.

"Oh, don't make it harder for me," she cried. "Can't you see it's breaking my heart to vex you?"

"Why not postpone everything for a couple of months? In the ordinary way, you wouldn't have been married sooner."

"I can't do that after what has occurred between you and Willie. You have insulted him and turned him out of the house, and either I must stand by him now or break with him. If I hold off for two months he would see that I doubted him—doubted him just when he wanted help. It's impossible."

Vawdrey appreciated the argument and saw that he must tell her what McVitie had discovered. He put out his hand and drew her toward him, and she knelt down beside his chair.

"I'm going to hurt you, dearest," he said, speaking very reluctantly. "I think most fathers would refuse to tell you; but your mother and I have always brought you up to judge for yourself and have always trusted you."

"I know you have."

"If Pfeiffer had come to me yesterday I should

have given my consent. He is—no one in particular, but, then, we aren't, either; and I don't care a button whether you marry a title or not so long as you are happy. He is very short of money and you will be very rich, so I might have suspected him, as I've suspected plenty of others, of fortune-hunting. But I didn't, because I liked him and thought him straight and honest."

"He *is* straight and honest."

"That's where I've got to hurt you, dear. He is neither."

"Father!"

The cry was full of incredulity and of suffering.

"I, less than anybody, suspected him of having a hand in this wretched robbery, but the facts are against him."

Ethel rose slowly from her knees and stood looking at her father. Her arms hung straight, her body was motionless, her face frozen into a tragic expression of amazement. The moment was filled with the poised expectancy of drama, the almost unbearable excitement which radiates from the actors while a vital decision is taking shape in the mind. In the theatre such moments are only possible when the playwright is great enough to efface himself and to make the audience forget that the scene has been written and rehearsed. Like the playwright, Vawdrey knew the words which should come next. For had he not studied his daughter, watched her, trained her from childhood? Yet, unlike the playwright, he did not feel

certain that the expected words would come. True, he had taught her the value of facts, and to base her judgment upon them without being seduced by sentiment or inclination. But had he ever reached and influenced the core of feminine nature—that capacity for refusing to believe ill of a lover? Would she accept his statement and his proofs? Or would she turn from them uninterested, secure in the belief that one man in the world was incapable of infamy?

He waited, scarcely breathing; and when the answer came he was not altogether surprised. For what is education when confronted with instinct?

"I don't believe it," she said slowly.

"I wondered if you would," he could not help saying.

"I don't believe it. Do you?"

"Yes."

She continued to keep her eyes on his, and her breast heaved with gathering indignation as she retorted:

"Is that what the best detective in Edinburgh thinks he has found out?"

"He has satisfied me that he is right."

"Oh, it's too horrible," she cried.

Then, controlling herself again, she went on:

"So, if I marry him, it means——"

"Ostracism. And, worse than that, it means that, too late, you will come to believe it too."

"If I thought that it would be easy. But I

don't, and I can't throw him over just because other people do."

"Am I 'other people'?" Vawdrey pleaded.

She drew nearer to him and put her hands in his, saying:

"Father, I can't argue, I can't explain; but I am perfectly certain that Willie is as innocent of this as you are. Am I, at the time when everybody is against him, when he most wants help, to leave him?"

Vawdrey gripped her hands tightly. There had never been any make-believe between him and Ethel, and his plain Yorkshire mind was revolted by the idea that any end justified deception. Smart and frivolous as she might seem to others, he knew that she had his capable brains and his point of view in affairs; and he could not lie to her.

"If you ask me as your father," he said, "I say throw him over at once. If you ask me as an impartial man, who likes playing the game without ever thinking whether it's worth the candle, I say wait. Whatever adviser you may consult he will not say more than that you know the position now, and Pfeiffer is bound to clear himself before he can ask you to marry him."

Vawdrey, speaking in perfect honesty, made a far stronger appeal than if he had taken refuge in unqualified prohibition. He won her, and after a minute's thought she said:

"Very well. There shall be no engagement for

the present. I don't believe it and I am not afraid, nor is he, and we can wait for a time."

"Then we'll leave it at that," Vawdrey said, with a sigh of relief.

"Best of fathers," she said, smiling.

"I don't think so," he answered, returning her smile. "The best of fathers would have persuaded you to put Pfeiffer out of your thoughts. Because, dear child," he added gravely, "it must come to that."

"I can't believe it. I don't think I ever shall, even if they send him to prison."

"What are you going to say to him?"

"What you've told me."

"No. You must be very careful. You'd better say the engagement must be hung up for a time without giving a definite reason."

"Can I do that fairly?"

"I think so. Tell him to ask again in six months' time. If McVitie is right, he will know what you mean and will sheer off. If not—well, he can prove it."

"I ought to tell him."

"Why? Of course, after what I said, he can see he's found out; that's why he tried to make you run away with him. But I don't want actually to accuse him until McVitie is in a position to prove what he says. It might get us into a disagreeable mess."

"Very well," she said, after a moment's reflec-

tion. "I will only tell him there is an obstacle, which will disappear in a short time."

"Yes, put it that way."

She lifted her face to his and kissed him. Then she went into the hall, where Pfeiffer was waiting for her.

As she came slowly toward him he turned and faced her. She sat down on the sofa without a word, for she was at the point of bursting into tears.

"Well?" he asked in a dull voice.

She forced herself to raise her eyes to his as she said: "Dear, you must go away. But only for a time."

"Why?" he demanded with sudden passion. "What reason does he give? Has he persuaded you to throw me over for the sake of—oh! I can't believe it of you."

"I can't tell you all father said; but you mustn't think badly of him or of me. Just for the moment things are in a knot. You must be content with that and with knowing that it will all come right very soon."

"How can I? Why have you and he suddenly turned against me? You're keeping back something. If there's anything against me I ought to be told."

"I *am* keeping back something — something which, if it were true, you would not need to ask. But I can't tell you what it is. You must just trust me and believe that—that I love you always."

He bent forward and caught her hands in his.

"Come with me to-morrow," he pleaded.

She shook her head gently.

"No. I want you to go right away—go abroad or somewhere till the winter. Then—come back to me."

"What's the use of that?" he cried roughly. "Oh, I know what will happen. Everything will be done to get you away from me and make you forget. Day after day you'll be under pressure—pressure from every one, from your father and mother, and your friends—and soon you'll be brought into line. Oh, I know. We've all seen it scores of times."

"That's not just," she said, with a rising flush in her cheeks. "If you think I shall forget you so easily you cannot have much faith in me."

"I have, indeed I have," he cried. "But I want to save you from this struggle. What can be the object of it except to make you forget me? What can it lead to? Nothing. If you stand firm we are only just where we are now. Your father won't give his consent any the more. Come with me now, dearest. Come now and I swear you sha'n't repent it."

"I can't. You must take things as they are. Surely, if you care, it is not a great deal to ask."

"If I care!" he broke out.

She stood up, looking at him with sad, tired eyes. He saw that she was resolute and that he was forced to accept her decision.

"Am I not to see you?" he asked.

"Later."

"But, at least, you will write?"

"Yes. I will write. I must go now. Good-by."

She drew nearer to him, and he took her in his arms and kissed her. Then she released herself and went slowly up the stairs. At the top she turned, and their eyes met in a long glance of farewell.

BOOK IV

WHAT LUKE JOHNS DISCOVERED

CHAPTER I

THE next morning, while Pfeiffer was motoring to the station to catch the south-bound express, Arthur Drury was breakfasting at his chambers in Half Moon Street after a night spent in the train. He had found a letter awaiting him, which said that a meeting of the underwriters concerned in the insurance of the necklace was arranged for half-past ten.

When he reached the office most of them were already in the partners' room. Ten firms, in addition to his own, were interested in the policy; and Mr. Porton, of Porton & Paver, his firm's solicitors, was also present. From the circumstances of the case the claim was regarded with suspicion, and there was a strong feeling that it should be resisted if it were possible to do so. Mr. Hinchin, the senior partner of Hinchin & Company, with whom Drury worked, greeted him none too warmly.

"Well, Drury," he said, "this is a nice affair to be in—a very nice affair. One premium paid, and a claim in full, I suppose, for twenty thousand pounds. Let's hear all about it. You know every one present."

Drury nodded to the others and sat down. He felt very uncomfortable; for, in addition to the loss which fell on himself, he knew that some re-

sentment would be shown at such a heavy claim following so closely upon the issue of a policy. Of course, such things did happen occasionally; but they were not accepted with cheerfulness, and he could see that everybody was in a bad temper about it.

"Fire away," Hinchin said, rapping on the table with a pencil. "Tell us how it happened."

"Well, I don't know very much, because I left early yesterday morning, as soon as I heard about it. We were staying with Vawdrey, the iron-master, at Gains."

"Where's Gains?" snapped a waspish little man named Garrod.

"In Scotland, near Montrose. Vawdrey has just bought the place and asked several people up for the shooting."

"Who was there?" Hinchin asked.

"Sir Charles and Lady Benyon, myself, Fraser, a man named Pfeiffer who is on the Stock Exchange, a Miss Carew, and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing. It was a pretty gay party, and a lot of rotting went on. And the day before yesterday we got up a hoax for Mrs. Dayrell-Wing and hid her necklace."

"Who hid it?"

"Fraser and I. We tipped the maid and got hold of the necklace before dinner. There was a bit of a clamor, and then, of course, we found it."

"What are you telling us this for? Has it any bearing on the theft?"

"It may have put it into one of the servants' heads. I thought I'd better mention it."

"Well, go on."

"After dinner there was dancing, and it was about one o'clock when we went to bed. The next morning—that was yesterday—I was going down to breakfast when I met Vawdrey, and he told me the necklace had been stolen."

"Any particulars?"

"Only that it had disappeared in the night. I know she had it on when she went up to bed."

"What is being done—do you know?"

"Vawdrey wired to Edinburgh for a detective. I saw him at Montrose on his way."

"And that's all you know?"

"Yes."

"Seems to me we want further information," one of the men said. "Hadn't we better send a trusty man up?"

"Who's the detective?" Hinchin asked.

"McVitie."

"Oh, he's all right. Quite a good man," some one said. "But we ought to get in touch with him."

There was a pause. No one seemed to have any further suggestion to offer, and the meeting gave signs of beginning to break up. One or two men rose from their chairs. Suddenly, Garrod rapped out a question to Drury.

"Who's Mrs. Dayrell-Wing?"

The tone was peremptory and not very civil, and Drury flushed up as he answered:

"Oh, she's a lady well known in society. She's an Australian, a widow."

"How old is she?"

"She looks about thirty-two or thirty-three."

"An Australian. When did she come to London?"

"I met her first about a year ago. I don't know how long she's been here—not long, I think."

"Do you know anything about her?"

The flush on Drury's face deepened and his temper rose.

"I've told you what I know," he answered.

"Yes—that she comes from Australia. That's a large place. Who was her husband? Where does she get her income?"

"I'm damned if I know," Drury answered rudely. "I'm not a detective, and I haven't found it usual to employ one to inquire into a lady's antecedents. I can only tell you that she *is* a lady."

"Yes, yes," Hinchin interposed. "But Garrod's quite right in asking about her. At the time we underwrote this jewelry we didn't get much to go upon, you remember."

"You got a valuation and a banker's reference and a personal reference."

"Of course we did or we shouldn't have taken it. But I raised the point with you at the time that she was rather an unknown quantity."

"And I told you you couldn't do business at all

if you wanted everybody's family history for generations back."

"Are we to take it, then, that you don't know anything about her?" Garrod asked.

His rasping voice infuriated Drury; but he controlled his tongue and answered sharply.

"I know quite enough to guarantee her. She's an intimate friend of mine, and in my opinion she's above suspicion of any sort. She goes to some of the best houses in London and is very popular. As to her means, I can only tell you that she lives in a flat in Mount Street rented at six hundred a year; and, besides this necklace, she has other jewelry insured for nearly fifteen thousand."

"Do you know where she gets her income from?"

"No. And I shouldn't be impertinent enough to ask."

Garrod leant back in his chair and crossed his legs. Then, looking up at the ceiling, he said:

"Mr. Drury doesn't seem able to give us much information, nor does he seem able to discuss this matter with businesslike calmness. I suggest that for a few minutes he should leave us to consider it by ourselves."

Drury jumped up.

"I agree it would be better," he said sarcastically. "I'm afraid I can't be of service in following Mr. Garrod's speculations."

No one spoke, and Drury went out of the room.

When he had gone Garrod leant forward and said with emphasis:

"I don't believe she ever lost it."

Several of the men nodded assent.

"You see," Hinchin said, "we know absolutely nothing at present. It's impossible to come to any conclusion on the data we've got. But McVitie's sharp enough in a case like this; we've had to do with him before."

"We must get into touch with him at once," Garrod declared. "Who'll go? Shall we send a detective or shall one of us go?"

"Will *you* go?" Hinchin suggested.

"If you like."

"What do you think?" Hinchin asked, turning to the solicitor.

Mr. Porton had taken no part in the discussion, but his shrewd eyes showed that he had not missed a word. Now, shifting his position a little so as to command a more direct view of the party, he answered:

"That would do no harm, but I have an alternative proposal to make to you. It has just occurred to me, and I think it might be worth consideration." He paused a moment and then went on:

"At present we know practically nothing about the affair, and I rather sympathize with Mr. Drury's feeling that Mr. Garrod's suspicions are uncalled for—yet. He knows the lady and we don't, and I daresay she is all that he seems to think her."

"It's always fishy when a risk like this matures within a few months after it's accepted," Garrod interrupted.

"I agree. But you can only surmise fraud on the general ground that it is—er—fishy. There's no more reason why the necklace should be stolen five years hence than now."

"Of course, of course."

"Still, it's worth looking into, as you say. And if you find nothing suspicious you can fall back on the usual all-over-Europe hunt."

"Quite so. And we can draw our checks and look pleasant."

"Could you ever do that, Garrod?" a man asked with a smile.

"Oh, I'm as good a loser as any one when the game's fair."

"I take it," Porton said, "that, in this instance, at any rate, the lady's fair."

"Yes; a pretty face and a nimble wit, and I expect she lives on both of 'em."

"Well, to get back to business," Porton said, "if the lady is really not all she should be she wants clever watching. If, on the other hand, you're wrong, and it proves to be a straightforward case of burglary, there's more than a chance that some one in the house—one of the servants—is standing in. My experience goes to show that nine times out of ten that is so."

"I agree," Hinchin said.

"In either event, your best chance of recovering

is to have a man in the house. But the drawback to that is that, nearly always, he is known to be a detective and so puts every one on their guard."

"Yes."

"Now, if it can be arranged, I've got a man in view who is a complete stranger to England, and he might go as a guest and stay in the house."

"Who is he?" two or three men asked.

"He's an American, who is over here with his wife on a holiday. They are private detectives in New York and usually work together, doing mostly society scandal cases and so on. We have employed them more than once on delicate inquiries and have been very well satisfied with them."

"That sounds all right," Garrod said. "But are they presentable — English country-house style?"

"Perfectly. All the more so because, as Americans, they will be pardoned for any little slips."

"Can you get at them to-day?"

"Yes. They called on me a few days ago. They're staying at a hotel in Bloomsbury."

"What's his name?"

"His name is Luke Johns."

"That's inspiring," Hinchin said, with a laugh. "It sounds like a missionary."

"Ah, but he doesn't look like one. He's a little, fattish, tight-lipped fellow, and his wife's smart and very well dressed—quite the sort of person you wouldn't mind taking in to dinner—er—at some —one else's house."

"I think we'd better try them?" Hinchin suggested, looking round for approval. "But aren't there difficulties in the way, Porton? This man Vawdrey won't want a couple of detectives thrust upon him as extra guests for his shooting party."

"I've thought of that," Porton answered, "and I'm sure he'll listen to reason. I know him fairly well. He's a very good fellow, one of the best, and I'd go up and arrange it with him myself."

"What about Drury?" Garrod asked. "He'll be warning his lady friend to look out for herself and then all our efforts will be in vain."

"Why tell him at all?" another man asked. "He needn't go back there, and he'll know nothing about it."

"Oh, you can't rely on that," Porton said. "If she writes and tells him that some people have come to the house he may guess. Besides, I think it's better he should go back. If Mr. Garrod is right you don't want to disturb the game."

"Just so," Garrod agreed. "But he'll tell her."

"No, he won't. Leave him to me. I'll have a talk with him and win his co-operation."

"Is it going to run us into much expense?" Hinchin asked.

"It ought not to. The Luke Johns are on a holiday, and it will amuse them to see the inside of an English household and a bit of moorland scenery. I can put it to them to accept their expenses—say twenty pounds—with a big reward if they recover the jewelry."

"Five hundred or a thousand, you mean?"

"Yes. It's worth that."

No one seemed to have anything further to say, and Hinchin at length summed up:

"Then, shall we leave it in Mr. Porton's hands to act on those lines?"

Every one agreed, and after one or two final words the meeting broke up. Porton went to find Drury, who was in his own room.

"May I come and have a chat?" he asked, adopting his most conciliatory manner.

"Oh, certainly," Drury said, as he rose from his chair. "Sit down, won't you? Will you smoke?"

"Thanks."

He lit a cigar and gossiped for a minute or two before he touched upon the subject of the robbery. Then, after a short pause, he said:

"About this affair, Mr. Drury. I thought I'd come and tell you that we've decided upon a plan which I think you will approve."

"I'm glad to hear it," Drury answered, with a perceptible increase of coldness in his tone.

"In these cases every one must pull together, and it would be most regettable if any little misunderstanding were to exist between you and the others. Especially so, because your co-operation is necessary—not, of course, in any active way, but simply in forgetting all I'm going to tell you."

"Why tell me if you want me to forget it?"

"Because I shouldn't like you to think that any-

thing was being done behind your back. We must work together."

"Well?"

"You took umbrage—and I think quite justifiably—at Mr. Garrod's remarks. He has not a very happy way of expressing himself."

"I thought he was talking nonsense, and offensive nonsense at that."

"He was, rather. There's no ground for reflecting on Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's character; we're all agreed upon that. But if you call on a man to pay up a large sum of money he naturally wants to get as near the bottom of the matter as he can."

"Oh, certainly; I do myself."

"Quite so. Now, at present we know absolutely nothing; and don't misunderstand me when I say that we don't even know that the jewelry *was* stolen. We want to know that first, and then we want to know who took it."

"Yes."

"Given that it was stolen, it's a fair inference that there's some one in the house who knows something about it; servants are nearly always involved in a thing of this kind."

"Very often."

"So this is what we propose. You shall go up to Gains to-night. Say nothing of what has been discussed either to Mrs. Dayrell-Wing or to any one else. If questions are asked, you believe that it is in the hands of the detective from Edinburgh and that he is doing all that is possible."

"What else?"

"I will go with you, and I shall bring with me a couple of friends—very pleasant Americans. I shall arrange for Mr. Vawdrey to ask them to stay at Gains for a few days."

"Detectives! But I'm sure Mr. Vawdrey won't stand having any one posing as a guest in order to spy on the house."

"I think he will if I ask him and if you ask him."

Drury hesitated for some time before he said:

"Well, I don't mind. I'm as keen as any one to clear the thing up."

"Naturally you are, and this is the best chance you have of doing it. But you must remember that, if it is to succeed, no one must know about it. For instance, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing mustn't know."

"Why not?" Drury asked, with a look of annoyance on his face.

"For two reasons. In the first place, if she is told, some one else will be told, and in twenty-four hours it will be common property. In the second place, we must have independent proof that the necklace was really stolen."

"That's absurd."

"Pardon me, it is necessary. I agree there's nothing against her, not a breath. But once the suggestion has been made we must prove it to be unfounded. A thing like that wants killing; it isn't enough to put it on one side and disregard it."

"Yes, I see that," Drury answered reluctantly. "All the same, it's very awkward for me to feel

that she is being suspected and spied upon. It's altogether different to having some one there to watch the servants."

"I agree it is awkward. But there's no other way out of it. And unless she's told she won't know anything about it."

"Well, I don't like it; and, in spite of all you say, I don't see the necessity."

"It exists and I strongly urge you to yield to it."

"Suppose I don't."

"In that case, Mr. Garrod, at all events, will never be brought to believe in Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's innocence." He had struck the right note. Drury disliked Garrod extremely, and believed him capable of gloating over the dissemination of a scandal; and in connection with Mrs. Dayrell-Wing this was unbearable. As Porton said, her innocence must be proved in order to muzzle him, and after a moment's reflection Drury gave a reluctant assent.

"Yes, I see," he said. "I suppose, as things are, that one can't help oneself."

"I think it's the best course, really I do."

"Very well."

"Then I'll meet you to-night on the train. I must be off now and make arrangements. Good-by."

"Good-by."

"Shall I order you a sleeping berth?"

"Yes, will you?"

"That chap only wants handling," Porton said

to himself, as he went back to his office. "He's a good enough fellow, but I think he's a bit gone on the Australian widow. I shouldn't wonder if he had a rude awakening."

CHAPTER II

ON reaching his office, Porton telephoned to the hotel where Luke Johns and his wife were staying and asked them to come and see him; and within half an hour they arrived.

As a girl, Mrs. Luke Johns had been very attractive and she still passed for a pretty woman. She was slight, with a very elegant figure, and small hands and feet. Her clothes were noticeably smart—a little too smart to be good. Her blue serge shirt was a shade too narrow, her hat perhaps a quarter of an inch too wide, her gloves a trifle too long, her sleeves a trifle too short. She meant to be *mondaine,* and, overshooting the mark by a fraction, she became "poster-ish."

With a good complexion, abundant hair, and remarkably well-shaped ears, she had kept the profile of twenty-two. It was only when one saw her full face that one perceived her to be a much older and more experienced woman. The eyes were old; they were surrounded by myriads of fine lines and they had lost their brilliancy. They looked at the world steadily, seldom kindled by emotion, and without expectation of great events. But, although they were expressive of great courage and determination, they had not the hard, glassy appearance which, more than anything, mars a woman's beauty.

She was distinctively American, and, in his own style, Luke Johns was equally unmistakable. He was angular without being thin, like one of Uncle Sam's caricatures in wood, and his clothes accentuated the squareness of his shoulders and his protuberant chest. His neck was short and thick, and his large bony head seemed too tightly screwed on to his body. He was clean-shaven, with high cheek bones and thin, mobile lips, and his eyes were set somewhat far apart under the wide forehead. He gave the impression of great alertness, both of body and mind, like a boxer in the ring.

Porton begged them to sit down, saying:

"I've sent for you to ask if you'd care to take up a case which has just come before me. Are you more or less at liberty for a week or so?"

"We're seeing London," Johns answered. "But that isn't urgent. What's the business?"

"Well, a certain lady is staying at a house in Scotland, and the night before last a very valuable diamond necklace belonging to her disappeared. At present we have no particulars, except that the matter has been placed in the hands of a very capable detective."

"Official, I suppose?" Mrs. Luke Johns asked.

"Yes. He was called in by her host, whom I happen to know fairly well. However, in this matter I'm not acting for him or for the lady. My clients are certain members of Lloyds who, only a few months ago, accepted a risk of twenty thousand pounds on the necklace."

"Just so. And they want to know where she's put it," Johns said.

His short cut to a carefully prepared explanation took Porton aback.

"Well—er—" he said, "we're not justified in putting it quite in that way. But it has been suggested—I say, suggested—that something of that kind is a possible solution of the mystery."

"What is her name?" Mrs. Luke Johns asked.

"Mrs. Dayrell-Wing. She is a widow from Australia, who came to this country some few years ago. She seems to be very wealthy, and I am told she is well known in London society."

"In New York they come from 'Frisco," Johns remarked dryly. "And they're real careless about diamonds; they always lose them. Even if they aren't insured it's a useful hint to some one that they want new ones."

"Come, come," Porton said, smiling in spite of being a good deal shocked. "You mustn't jump to conclusions like this. As far as we know, the lady's as respectable as Britannia."

"Just so."

"However, whether that's so or not, my clients feel that it is a case which calls for searching investigation."

"Of course," Mrs. Luke Johns agreed softly.

"Now, we have the fullest confidence in the detective who is working on it; he's a first-rate man. I don't want to interfere with him in any way, but I want to supplement his inquiries by introducing

into the house some one who is not known to be a detective. And it occurred to me, after your call here, that perhaps you might like to spend a week of your holiday in Scotland and just look round."

"We should love it."

"Good. Can you travel up with me to-night?"

"Why not?" Luke Johns said.

"Very well, then. Now, as to your fee. If my clients have to pay this claim they are not in a position to be generous. I said I would put it to you in this way—that you should regard it as a pleasure trip, with fares paid and a small check for expenses—say, twenty pounds. If, through your efforts, the necklace is recovered, they will recognize your services handsomely. In that event I think I can promise you five or six hundred guineas."

Luke Johns looked at his wife, and she answered:

"Mr. Porton, whatever you settle will be welcome to us. We didn't think of doing business over here, but if we can be useful to you we shall be just too pleased."

"Thank you very much. Then we'll leave it on those terms. And I shall expect to see you on the train to-night—eleven-thirty from King's Cross. I'm going to travel with you because I have to arrange for your reception. There may be a little difficulty, but I hope not."

"We'll be there."

"Oh, and by the way, Mr. Drury will travel with us. His firm is one of those concerned in the insurance, and the policy was effected through him. He was staying in the house when the robbery took place, and I'd better give you a hint that I fancy he is not altogether indifferent to the lady. Consequently, you needn't say to him that your special mission is to keep her under observation—you understand?"

"Quite," Luke Johns answered brightly. "He thinks we're just going up to admire the view."

"Well, not quite that," Porton answered rather pompously, "but to have an eye on the servants."

"We'll do our best, Mr. Porton," Mrs. Luke Johns said, as she shook hands. "We'd *like* that reward."

When they had left the office Luke Johns said:

"Five or six hundred guineas—that's three thousand dollars."

"We could spend it," his wife answered.

"We could. But we've got no chance; we don't know the ground here as we do in New York."

"We've no chance—unless we know her."

"My Gawd; wonder if it's Lil Potter."

"It might be anybody. There are plenty."

"That's so. Wish she said she came from 'Frisco; it'd seem more homelike, wouldn't it?"

CHAPTER III

THAT evening, soon after eleven o'clock, Mr. Porton drove up to King's Cross Station in a taxicab in time to meet the Luke Johns and to introduce them to Drury. His afternoon had been spent in thinking over arrangements, and in framing a long telegram to Vawdrey which should be sufficiently explicit without being indiscreet. The final draft was as follows:

> "Please bring car yourself to meet ten twenty-four A. M. train to-morrow at Montrose. Important I should see you, so am traveling with Drury and with two American friends of yours, who anticipate pleasure of few days at Gains if convenient. Bring McVitie with you in car, as must see him before I return next train.
>
> "AUBREY PORTON."

Vawdrey had telegraphed an acknowledgment of this, and when the train drew into Montrose he was waiting on the platform. Porton hastened up to him and shook hands, saying:

"How are you, my dear fellow? I want two minutes alone with you before I introduce your friends from New York."

"Right you are. I don't know what you're driving at, but come in here. Will your friends,

whom you call *my* friends, be all right by themselves?"

"Drury'll look after them."

They went into the deserted waiting-room, and Porton put his hand on Vawdrey's arm, saying:

"I'm taking a liberty, Vawdrey, an infernal liberty, to oblige a client. And if you don't like it, I'll apologize, and no harm will have been done."

"Tell me what it is first before you go on to the apology," Vawdrey answered, with a smile. He knew Porton well, and in London they often met in the card-room of the club.

"I'm acting for the insurers of the stolen necklace. Drury came to London knowing nothing except that it had disappeared, and that McVitie was in charge of the case. Is there a clue?"

"Yes, he knows who took it," Vawdrey answered gravely. "But there isn't evidence enough yet for an arrest."

"Then you haven't recovered the necklace?"

"No."

"Ah! Of course, we didn't know you'd got even so far as you have; and it was the general feeling that something ought to be done from our end, as we're the really interested parties."

"No doubt you are."

"At the meeting yesterday I made a proposal, and they jumped at it. That's why I'm here. After what McVitie has discovered it may seem superfluous; but, as the necklace is still missing, I don't think it's necessarily so. And now that we're here I want your consent to go on."

"Well, what is it?"

"It's this. I've brought down two American detectives whom I know personally. They happened to be in England on a holiday and called on me a day or two ago; and it struck me that they might be more useful than any one else in running this thing to earth. As a favor to me and to Drury, I want you to receive them as your guests for a few days. They won't interfere with McVitie, and their assistance may be very valuable."

"Oh, I don't like that," Vawdrey said, somewhat impatiently. "And besides the culprit's gone. He left this morning. In confidence I may tell you, it's a man named Pfeiffer—do you know him?"

"No. Are you sure he did it?"

"McVitie is; and from what he tells me I don't see who else could have done it. But he must have had an accomplice, because he got rid of the necklace and it hasn't been found."

"Then it's worth trying these people. Probably the accomplice was one of the servants.'

"No, no; you can't ask me to do that."

"I do ask it," Porton said firmly.

"It's very unpleasant. The people who are staying with me would resent it."

"They'll never find out. Johns and his wife are quite all right, and they're as clever as monkeys. All you have to do is to introduce them as friends you met when you were last in New York; they'll do the rest."

"I'm sick to death of this beastly affair," Vawdrey cried. "I've never been so worried in my

life. I can't tell you everything, but it's touched me very closely."

Porton, like many clever men, was always eager for his own schemes, and he did not mean to let Vawdrey block this one.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I understand your feelings perfectly. But in fairness, as a matter of business, you ought to help my clients. I'll put it to you as a favor to myself."

Vawdrey shrugged his shoulders, saying:

"If you make it a personal matter I can't very well refuse you. But I don't like it, Porton."

"No; but if we recover the jewelry you will. You'll feel then that the end justified the means."

"I hope to heaven I shall never feel that about anything. That's a dirty argument, and this is rather a dirty business—upon my soul it is."

"Then say you won't do it and I'll take them back again," Porton answered, not daring to press him too urgently.

"No. You've come, and I'll go through with it. Perhaps something will result, and really I should be thankful if it did."

He was longing for positive proof of Pfeiffer's guilt; for, if the theft could not be brought home to him, there would always be the danger of his overpersuading Ethel and inducing her to marry him.

"You've quite made up your mind?" Porton asked, eyeing him shrewdly.

"Yes. I'll do it—and, to be honest, not entirely

to oblige you. I want this damned fellow caught."

"I hope he will be. And in any case you've laid me under a deep obligation, for which I'm very grateful."

"That's all right."

"Now, I'd better have a word with McVitie; he may want smoothing down. Will you wait here? And I'll bring him and the Johns along. Where is he?"

"In the car outside."

"Right. By the way, secrecy's everything; need you tell Mrs. Vawdrey?"

"Not if you don't want me to. I've got to lie all round, so I may as well lie to her as to the others. But I expect she'll spot them."

"She won't, if you don't give it away."

Porton went out to find McVitie, who had driven from Gains with Vawdrey and was on his way to Edinburgh.

"Mr. McVitie?" he asked suavely.

"Yes."

"I must introduce myself. My name is Porton, of Porton & Paver, solicitors; and I am acting for several firms at Lloyds who are interested as insurers in the loss of this necklace."

"You wished to see me about it?"

"If you can give me a few minutes. The fact is, my clients are determined to do everything possible to unravel the matter; and in addition to the inquiries which you are following up—which, of course, could not be in better hands—they think

it most desirable to have some one in the house who is entirely unknown there. You understand, it won't interfere with the measures you are taking or in any sense affect your control of the case. It's simply an additional effort."

"You have brought a London detective? I don't need him," McVitie answered, with a sour expression on his face. He had a keen sense of what was due to him, and was not going to tolerate officious intervention.

"No; I've brought an American and his wife, whom I have employed in the States on one or two occasions. They happened to be in London, and my clients decided to take advantage of it and put them on to this affair. They are going to spend a few days at Gains as Mr. Vawdrey's guests—friends whom he met in New York."

"Oh!"

"Of course, the case being in your hands, I did not propose to do this without consulting you, so I asked Mr. Vawdrey to arrange a meeting here. I trust, however, that you—er—see no objection?"

If Mr. McVitie had intended to remain at Gains he would have refused point blank. But his work there was done; and he was leaving for London to rejoin Shaw, who was shadowing Pfeiffer. So he answered: "There's no objection, if your clients are willing to waste their money."

Porton was nettled and said:

"I don't think we need assume yet that it's waste of money."

"You may. I'm following up the right man."

"And the accomplice?"

McVitie was touched on a sore point, for his inquiries in the neighborhood had resulted in nothing, and he was at a loss to know how Pfeiffer had got rid of the necklace.

"If there was one he'll not be found at Gains," he answered. "I've finished the inquiry there."

"Ah, then my American friends won't clash with you at all. That's just as well. Now, if you'll come with me I'll introduce you. You might, perhaps, tell them briefly what has been done."

McVitie, in a contemptuous mood, followed him to the waiting-room, where they were joined by Drury and the Luke Johns.

"Mr. Vawdrey," Porton said, with a smile, "let me present Mr. and Mrs. Luke Johns—friends whom you met when you were last in America."

Mrs. Luke Johns shook hands with Vawdrey, repeating his name in a tone of interrogation. Luke Johns, on the spot at once, said:

"Happy to meet you again. When was it you were in our city?"

"Mr. McVitie—Mrs. Luke Johns—Mr. Luke Johns," Porton went on. "Mr. Johns, you may like a moment's chat with Mr. McVitie while the car is getting ready."

McVitie gave Johns a limp hand, and his face was as expressionless as a piece of wood. Johns drew him aside and, disregarding his evident dis-

inclination to say anything, began telling him how much honored he felt in meeting him, and went on to a series of deferential questions about the case.

Standing together, the men presented a remarkable contrast. McVitie, tall, thin, and leathery, with stooping shoulders and pale eyes, looked a typical Glasgow citizen. His badly fitting clothes were much worn, his boots were clumsy, and his unbuttoned overcoat sagged away in heavy creases. He looked rather stupid and quite uninterested; but he was far from being either. He was taking Luke Johns' measure as carefully as if he had been interviewing a criminal. He had no faith in what he called "fancy detectives," private inquirers who worked unofficially, and were often capable of changing sides if it suited their pockets to do so. In his opinion, some were liars, some blackmailers, and the rest mostly incompetent; for he had the official mind, which resents outside competition with a government department. Johns struck him as wide-awake, flashy, a leaper to conclusions, probably a man who did not keep note-books. But, grudgingly, he admitted his acuteness. He would have liked to think him a fool; but he had to fall back on thinking him a rogue.

Luke Johns, standing beside McVitie, looked below the average height and unnaturally broad. His high shoulders were made higher by the cut of his jacket, and his soft hat was pulled well over his forehead and set at an acute angle. His eyes were as bright as a bird's, and his thin lips moved

rapidly as he talked. To McVitie he was friendly and respectful. He guessed that he was "feeling bad" at another detective being brought into the case, and he made it a rule to keep on good terms with the official police and to win a friend whenever he could. So he listened patiently to the Scotchman's slow and unwilling statements, and loaded him with congratulations on having traced the theft to the right man.

"Seems to me," he said in conclusion, "I sha'n't get the salvage money this journey. I'm a day after the funeral."

"You'll find Gains a pleasant hoose for a stay," McVitie answered, with a dry smile.

"I reckon so," Johns agreed cheerfully.

He was not convinced by McVitie's proofs against Pfeiffer, for experience had taught him that the obvious man was seldom the right one. Besides, Porton's theory that the necklace had never been stolen appealed to him as being far more probable. But he had no intention of disturbing McVitie's beliefs and bringing him back to Gains. He wanted the field to himself. Three thousand dollars were hanging to the recovery of the jewels.

During the first part of the drive to Gains Vawdrey was silent and did not respond to Mrs. Luke Johns' agreeable chatter. He was annoyed at having allowed himself to be persuaded by Porton: to pass off these Americans as friends whom he had met in New York was repugnant to his

sense of honor, and he began to dislike them very heartily. But for Ethel's sake he would never have agreed to it. He had seen her that morning, after Pfeiffer's departure, reserved and sad, and his heart was very sore at the danger into which she had fallen. It was the remembrance of her unusual quietness which had made him yield to Porton's persuasion. He longed for her safety, and, like a skilful surgeon, he believed that the most severe treatment was the kindest. Pfeiffer's guilt must be publicly proved, and any chance of doing so ought not to be rejected; so he had allowed the Luke Johns to come to Gains.

Sitting opposite to them in the motor he looked them over with a prejudiced eye. The woman was not so bad, certainly. She was good-looking, and had a Frenchified style about her, even if it was a little extravagant. Her accent, too, was not unpleasing. In fairness he was obliged to admit that she was attractive and quite capable of playing the part of a friend from America.

But, clearly, her husband did not belong to the aristocracy. He did not look as if he came from that city of culture which he called "Barston," nor did he carry in his face the signs of spiritual force which atone for lack of breeding. He was commonplace. His square, fattish body needed exercise, his feet and hands were chubby, and his tweed suit was execrable. Vawdrey, with some disgust, summed him up as an "outsider."

Yet, as he watched him, he saw that there was

a certain attractive quality about him, which drew off attention from his defects. The vivacious eyes, the expression of alertness when he talked, were striking; and Vawdrey could not help contrasting him with McVitie, whose *gaucherie* and fishlike indifference had annoyed him so much. Whatever Johns was, he was not a fool; and, as Vawdrey became more sure of this, his dislike began to wane.

So, when Luke Johns presently leant across to him and said, "Where was it we met you?" he answered with a smile:

"Perhaps at the hotel at Niagara. I was there last September."

Johns nodded approval, saying: "That'll do. Better get it fixed right or we'll be snagged at question time. Just to refresh your memory, I'm a retired pressman—used to do American politics for *The World* until an uncle died out West."

Mrs. Luke Johns took up the instructions in a perfectly natural tone, saying:

"We live very quietly and know few people. Neither Luke nor I are fond of society."

"Ah, I see," Vawdrey said. "You mean, your acquaintance is limited?"

"We know the people you and your friends don't," Johns summed up.

"Quite so."

CHAPTER IV

THE last five miles of the road was very rough, and the car did not reach Gains till nearly one o'clock. As it drew up at the door Mrs. Vawdrey and Ethel came out to meet it.

"So glad you've come back, Mr. Drury," Ethel called.

"Thanks very much," he answered. "London in August isn't very gay; and there was nothing to be done, so I got off as soon as I could."

"No news of the burglars, I suppose?"

"Not an oat."

"My dear," Vawdrey said to his wife, "let me introduce Mrs. Luke Johns and Mr. Luke Johns—friends whom I met at Niagara last year. I found them in the train at Montrose and persuaded them to come here for a few days before going further north."

"Mrs. Vawdrey?" Mrs. Luke Johns purred, as she held out her hand.

"How do you do?" Mrs. Vawdrey answered. She was accustomed to unexpected arrivals, for her husband often brought business friends home with him.

"My daughter," Vawdrey said.

"I'm proud to set foot in Scotland, Miss Vawdrey," Luke Johns announced. "The place from which my ancestors sailed for America."

"That must have been a long time ago," Ethel said in a voice of quiet surprise. She had no sarcastic intention, but this square little man looked so far removed from a Scottish ancestry.

"Oh, before my day," Johns answered. "In this country you come over with William the Conqueror, don't you? In America we come over with the Pilgrim Fathers. Well, I reckon we all swung on the same bough in the Garden of Eden."

Ethel laughed, but Mrs. Vawdrey looked shocked.

"Luncheon will be ready in half an hour," she said, turning to Mrs. Luke Johns. "Let me show you your room. Tom, will you look after Mr. Johns?"

"Come into the billiard-room," Vawdrey said. "I daresay you'd like a drink after the long drive."

"Thanks. See you later, Miss Vawdrey," Johns said.

Leslie Fraser was practising the anchor-stroke by himself and looked up as they entered.

"Good morning," he said to Vawdrey. "You were off early this morning."

"Yes. Our friend McVitie was leaving, and I took him to the train. Let me introduce Mr. Luke Johns—Mr. Fraser."

Fraser shook hands languidly. For a moment his eyes rested on Johns with a look of perplexed inquiry; but he said nothing, and presently resumed his game.

"What'll you have—whiskey?" Vawdrey asked,

going to a side-table, where some bottles and glasses were set out.

"Thanks. One finger and plenty of soda."

"Is that right? Excuse me a moment, will you? I must just say a word to the chauffeur."

He left the room, and Fraser, to make conversation, asked Johns from what part of America he came.

"I'm from New York. I was just saying to Miss Vawdrey that I was proud to set foot in Scotland, the country of my ancestors."

"Then it's your first visit?"

"It is. We're over on a holiday, and when Mr, Vawdrey saw us on the train this morning he pressed us to stop off for a few days. He's got a nice little place here."

"Glad you think so," Fraser answered coolly. He did not appreciate Luke Johns' description of his family estate, and he thought him a very bad specimen of an American. At first he had wondered where Vawdrey could have picked him up until he remembered that in business one had to make curious friends.

Johns caught the inflection of his voice, and shot a keen glance at him over the rim of his tumbler.

"Well, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Oh, certainly."

"He was telling me he'd just bought it."

"Yes. I sold it to him."

"You?"

"Yes," Fraser answered, as he pulled off a difficult shot. "In this country it's rather the fashion to sell one's family acres unless an heiress from your side comes to the rescue."

"That so? Sorry you find our ladies so unattractive," Johns said, with a laugh.

Fraser smiled faintly as he answered:

"You are too complimentary, Mr. Johns. I'm afraid that a truer reason was that I had nothing good enough to offer."

Johns laughed again, saying:

"You're modest. In America we mark the goods high, and then start in to educate opinion up to our prices."

"Really?"

"Yes. If you've got a stock to sell, or a girl to marry, or a patent food to boom, you advertise. Talk about it, and if you talk loud enough you can't fail."

Vawdrey now returned, and carried Johns off to show him his room. As they passed along the corridor he pointed to the first door on the right, saying in a low voice: "That was the room. And Pfeiffer had the next room."

"Are they open?" Johns asked.

"No."

"Have them left unlocked, please. I'll look in some time."

The Luke Johns were quartered in two rooms at the end of the corridor on the first floor, on the side of the house farthest from the wing and from

the back staircase. Fraser was next to them, and Ethel Vawdrey's bedroom and sitting-room were opposite.

"This is yours," Vawdrey said.

"Thanks."

"Ring if you want anything."

"I will."

When Vawdrey had left him Luke Johns locked the door and took note of his surroundings. Then, going to the inner door, which led into his wife's room, he tapped.

"Come," she called.

She was unpacking her dressing bag, and he went in and stood by her in silence. Presently he said:

"Swell house, this."

She looked up at him and nodded.

"Anything?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"No."

Then she added: "You'd better shave before lunch."

A few minutes later the gong sounded; and when they went down the rest of the party were already in the dining-room. Mrs. Vawdrey briefly made the necessary introductions, and put Mrs. Luke Johns on Vawdrey's left. Opposite to her was Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, to whom she at once began to talk.

"It's pleasant to get away here from London," she said. "This hot weather has been trying."

"It must have been," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing agreed. "I've never been in town in August."

"Haven't you? No; I suppose no one is except the sightseers."

"Nothing deters *them,* especially if they come from your country, Mrs. Johns," Vawdrey joined in. "Round about Westminster Abbey at this time of year there are more Baedekers to the square inch than anywhere in the world."

"That's so," Mrs. Luke Johns agreed, with a pleasant smile. "You see, there are a lot of people on the earth, and there's only one Westminster Abbey."

"And, if I may return the compliment, there's only one Niagara," Vawdrey answered.

"That's real prettily said, Mr. Vawdrey. Don't you agree, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing?"

"Oh, Mr. Vawdrey is a past master in politeness. I think he must have had a French ancestor."

Luke Johns was making himself agreeable to Hilda Carew, whose open-air style of beauty had taken his fancy.

"Have you ever been in America, Miss Carew?" he asked, when they had exhausted the weather and the scenery.

"Yes. I spent a winter in New York two years ago," she answered. "I was staying with the Pierponts. Do you know them?"

A shadow of caution came into Johns' eyes.

"No," he said. "Of course, I know all about them; they belong to the Four Hundred, and their press-agent lets you know it in every Sunday edition."

"Their press-agent?"

"The man who writes them up. Every millionaire has one; if he didn't he'd be done to death by interviewers and canvassers. It's a deal simpler to pay one man and let him square the rest."

"You're chaffing!"

"No, I'm dead serious. In America, if you've got any money, you've got to advertise. It's good for you and it's good for trade, and it's a rule of democracy that we all take care of each other. So, if you won't advertise on your own we just make you."

"What a horrible state of things if you happen to be shy."

"Shyness, Miss Carew, is selfishness under another name. If you spend twenty thousand dollars on a banquet, and don't let on what it cost, it's selfish. But if you give out an interview, with chunks of statistics about the number of Chinese who met their death in collecting the birds' nests for the soup, you're amusing a million people; and that seems cheap at the price."

"Well, I never heard it put that way before."

"No? I reckon the Pierponts didn't confide in you about their press fixings—thought you understood it, p'r'aps."

"But we don't do that sort of thing here."

"You're behindhand, I allow. But you're coming on. At the hotel I was reading all your illustrated journals. They've got a kind of outbreak of Miss Del Douro's photograph."

"They always have. She's very popular, so the papers always publish them."

"You've guessed right, Miss Carew, but you've got your sentence mixed. You mean—they always publish them, so she's very popular."

Hilda laughed, saying: "I'm afraid you're awfully cynical, Mr. Johns."

"Not cynical, Miss Carew; but I dote on facts. Most people don't; facts make 'em sick."

Lady Benyon, who had been listening to the conversation, now joined in.

"Facts are so unfashionable," she drawled. "They are left to the people who go in for higher education and wear sandals."

"That so?" Luke Johns exclaimed, with twinkling eyes. "And do all the liars wear boots? Now, I'd never have guessed that, Lady Benyon."

"But clothes are so expensive, haven't you noticed? I always know whether I shall like any one by the kind of hat she wears."

Fraser leant across, saying:

"If you want to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, I agree that hats are good evidence. The one you wore on Sunday was to the meanest intelligence mammonish and unrighteous."

"Glad you liked it," Lady Benyon answered.

"What's everybody doing this afternoon?" Vawdrey asked.

"Ethel is taking Lady Benyon and me for a run in the motor," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said.

"How delightful!" Mrs. Luke Johns cried quickly. "I just love motoring."

"Come with us, if you'd care to," Ethel said. "The roads aren't good, but the scenery's charming."

"I'd enjoy it enormously. What time do you start?"

"The car is ordered for a quarter past three."

"Is any one inclined for a walk?" Vawdrey asked. "To-morrow we shall be shooting again, I hope."

Sir Charles Benyon and Arthur Drury agreed to go with him. Leslie Fraser excused himself on the plea of having letters to write, and Luke Johns preferred to smoke a cigar in the garden.

As they went out from lunch Mrs. Dayrell-Wing lingered in the hall and allowed Drury to join her.

"Is there any news?" she asked.

"No; nothing. And I suppose nothing has been found out here?"

"The detective says he knows who it was; but I don't believe he really does, because he has gone away. I am so grieved and vexed about the loss falling on you."

"You mustn't think about that. I'm only in for a bit of it, and it's a matter of business and can't be helped."

"I feel so mean about it. You must let me pay you back your share."

"Certainly not. I couldn't dream of it."

"Dear boy! You mustn't stand on your dignity with me. Surely we know each other well enough——"

"It's delightful of you to say so. But there's only one thing I can ever take from you, and I haven't the cheek to ask for that—yet."

She did not answer; but evidently she was not displeased, for she smiled as she left him to get ready for her drive.

Drury felt horribly conscience-stricken. He was in love with her, and he had allowed these wretched Americans to come into the house and spy upon her. It was all very well for Porton to smooth it over and say that they were after one of the servants, but he knew well enough that it was Mrs. Dayrell-Wing whom the underwriters suspected, and they had engaged the Luke Johns to try and catch her. Well, at all events, they would fail, because she was innocent.

Still, he hated the idea, and he was half inclined to make confession to her, or to go to Vawdrey and insist on the Luke Johns being sent away. But he reflected that, in either way, he might create a very awkward situation, and, on the whole, he thought it was better to say nothing.

CHAPTER V

MR. and Mrs. Luke Johns were very clever people. They had made their way in the world not by means of any special knowledge or training, but by the continual exercise of their wits on problems of human conduct. In earlier life Luke Johns had been a clerk in a stock broker's office, and Mrs. Johns had worked for one of the great New York papers. They met in a boarding-house and became friendly ; and, as time went on, he began to help her in getting up information for her articles. The idea of starting an inquiry agency came to them after a rather sensational case in which they succeeded in obtaining some evidence which the police had failed to get. They saw that there was money to be made in the business, and, as they had then been engaged for some time, they married and set up as private detectives.

Their methods were not those of the Criminal Investigation Department. They were free lances, without legal powers or recognized status, and uncontrolled by any regulations. As far as possible they kept within the law, but they had little hesitation in going outside it if their object was sufficiently important and sufficiently remunerative. In such an event they trusted to luck and to their astuteness to save them, and one or the other usually served them.

Their connection was never large, and the chief part of their work was concerned with scandals rather than with crimes. They were not thief-takers, and more often than not their clients wished to avoid the publicity of the courts, either because their own hands were not clean or because the position of the culprit rendered exposure undesirable. In cases of this kind the Luke Johns were often able to effect a satisfactory arrangement and to obtain for themselves a handsome fee. It was not a mode of life peculiarly favorable to moral growth; but, as Luke Johns once remarked, a man's pocket isn't a church collecting bag—he can't fill it while he's singing a hymn.

Their methods of work were peculiar to themselves, and they did not follow the recognized course of building a complete proof upon a conjunction of apparently trivial facts. A half-burnt match or a speck of mud on a carpet would have meant nothing to them; and even if they had happened to notice such things, they would not have known how to use them. They were, indeed, quite unpractised in the science of constructive proof, and consequently McVitie's array of small discoveries had left them cold. They had not come to Gains to find out whether the robbery had been committed by an expert or by a first offender; they wanted to recover the necklace and get the reward, or, failing that, to enjoy their holiday.

It will be evident, then, that they were accustomed to work on lines which were amateurish and

unsound if judged by the ordinary police standards; and any one who is familiar with the subject will ask how they had managed to carry on. Briefly, their success was due to their remarkable judgment of probabilities, and to their capacity of selecting from them the right conclusion. It was due also to their extreme alertness of mind, which enabled them to collect and sift evidence, and perhaps not less to their discernment of the right moment for parting with a hundred dollar bill.

Another asset which they possessed was an absolute unscrupulousness in attaining a necessary object. On one occasion Luke Johns had broken into a house and ransacked a desk to get some letters which he believed to be there. He was caught in the act, but the letters were in his pocket, and his fee was two thousand dollars with immunity from prosecution.

Yet, with a code of morality elastic enough to sanction anything in the name of business, Luke Johns and his wife were good citizens in private life. They were frugal and hard-working, and they lived in almost complete seclusion, seldom indulging in any gaieties beyond an occasional visit to the theatre. Both were fond of music, and Mrs. Johns played the piano exceedingly well. Luke Johns' chief hobby was philately.

When Mr. Porton asked them to investigate the loss of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace they accepted because a week in Scotland would be pleasanter than in their London hotel.

There was also, of course, the chance of earning a big fee, but neither of them felt confident that they would discover the thief. For the business was really somewhat outside their scope except on the assumption that Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was an adventuress.

In discussing it, therefore, they expressly excluded the possibility that the robbery had been committed by some one outside the house, and adopted the theory that the necklace had not been stolen at all, or, alternatively, that the thief was some one outwardly respectable who was living in the house. When they learnt from McVitie that circumstances pointed to Pfeiffer and that he had gone away, they excluded him; because, in the first place, he was beyond the range of their inquiry, and because, in the second place, he was too obviously the right man. For almost always they found it was wise to swim against the stream of popular opinion, and in nine cases out of ten they were justified. Thus, they arrived at Gains with their field of action intentionally narrowed. Not that they believed that the criminal was necessarily to be found within the limits which they had fixed; but, if he were outside them, they could do nothing in the matter.

Starting on that basis, the first thing to be done was to examine Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, and with that object Mrs. Luke Johns had lost no time in making friends with her, and had gone motoring on the afternoon of their arrival.

Luke Johns, meanwhile, had put on his Homburg hat and chosen the largest kind of cigar in Mr. Vawdrey's cabinet. Thus equipped, he sauntered across the lawn and sat down in a long chair facing the house.

He saw Vawdrey and Sir Charles and Drury set out for their walk, and he saw Mrs. Vawdrey knitting on the sofa in the drawing-room. He saw a gardener attending to the flowers in the stone vases on the terrace, and he saw Gibson sitting in the sun on a Windsor chair, reading the newspaper. He saw everything there was to be seen, and all the time his active brain was centred upon Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace. Who had taken it? Where was it? And the further question: If A or B took it, why did he take it? What was the motive power behind the theft? Was it envy? Perhaps. Was it greed? More likely. Or was it pure viciousness, exercising itself without reason?

For the moment he still inclined to Mr. Porton's belief that the necklace had not been stolen. He had been warned that nothing was known of Mrs. Dayrell-Wing save that she had appeared in London about two years ago, and that she lived as if she had a great deal of money. From that to classifying her as an adventuress was but a small step; and, in his cynical judgment, it told against her that she was attractive and very smartly dressed. An adventuress in last year's frock would be an incredible variation of the wolf in sheep's clothing.

He finished his cigar without finding an answer to his questions, and, getting up, he strolled into the house. He went slowly up the stairs and halted at the top. The corridor was deserted, and he walked along it to the left, which was in the opposite direction to his room. One or two doors were open, and he went in, moving as quietly as a cat. One room he identified as Sir Charles Benyon's from a dressing-bag initialed "C. B." In another he saw some letters addressed to Miss Carew. It was just as well to know where every one slept.

He returned to the head of the staircase and went on toward his own room. Then, with a quick glance before and behind him, he opened the door of Pfeiffer's room and went in. McVitie had told him that the room had been thoroughly searched, and he did not intend to go over the ground again. Nor did he see much object in searching Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room; for, if the necklace had been hidden there, it was certain that she would have taken it with her when she moved. All he did, therefore, was to take a general survey.

On reaching his own room he unlocked a suitcase which he had not allowed the footman to unpack. It contained a curious assortment of things, such as are not usually found necessary for a country-house visit. An old pair of black trousers, a sleeved Cardigan jacket, black slippers with felt soles, a revolver and some cartridges, an electric

torch, a porcelain slate with pencil and sponge, a small tool pad and an oil can.

He took the oil can and went to the door. After making sure that no one was in the corridor he carefully oiled the hinges and the lock, working the door backward and forward until it opened without a sound. Then he went through the same process with the door of his wife's room.

After replacing the oil can he locked up the suitcase and washed his hands. Then he went downstairs and joined Mrs. Vawdrey in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VI

DURING the motor drive Mrs. Luke Johns took advantage of a pause in the conversation and said, as she looked Mrs. Dayrell-Wing full in the face:

"Mr. Vawdrey was telling us about your dreadful loss, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing. How could it have happened?"

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing did not flinch or change color.

"I really don't know anything," she answered, "except that the necklace was stolen while I was asleep."

"Some one got into your room? And you slept through it? That was real plucky of you."

"Oh, I can't claim to be plucky. I should have been frightened to death if I had woke up."

"Well, you must have a clear conscience to sleep like that. I'm sure I'd wake at anything."

"That's so curious, because I'm not at all a sound sleeper."

"Aren't you? Well, that does make it more puzzling. And the police haven't caught the man, have they?"

"No."

"Mrs. Luke Johns looked at her with eyes full of sympathetic interest, saying:

"It seems impossible you shouldn't have heard

him. Are you sure it was taken? Couldn't it have got slipped into a drawer or underneath something?"

"I thought so at first," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing answered, with limpid candor. "But I searched everywhere. And, besides, I *know* I put it in its box the night before, and the box was found in the passage, you know."

"Is that so? Well, I shall sleep with my door locked to-night, though I haven't got anything worth stealing. I'd die of fright if any one got in."

"My door *was* locked. The horrible detective kept pestering me to say it wasn't, but I'm quite certain about it."

"I can't bear police," Mrs. Luke Johns said, with a little shudder.

"They're excellent in their place, at crossings and so on," Lady Benyon remarked.

"You're insured, aren't you, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing?" Mrs. Luke Johns asked.

"Yes."

"Then will you buy another necklace?"

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing thought the question rather impertinent and she answered coldly:

"I haven't thought about it. I suppose I shall when I get the money."

"They can buy one for you, if they like, can't they?" Ethel asked.

"Can they? I don't mind that, as long as they let me choose it."

When they returned to Gains tea was waiting

in the hall, and Luke Johns was sitting beside Mrs. Vawdrey discussing the relative merits of poker and patience. The walking party appeared a few minutes later.

As it was the first really fine afternoon for more than a week, every one went into the garden as soon as tea was over.

Mrs. Luke Johns seemed to find Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's society congenial, for she attached herself to her, and left Drury to follow with Ethel. Johns accompanied Mrs. Vawdrey on a visit to the hot-houses, and the slight surprise which she had felt at her husband having brought him to Gains began to wear off as they talked. In his own phrase, he was making good with her; for he had quickly caught the shade of disapproval in her earlier manner, and he thought it wise to make a friend of her. It was easy. He could be soft-voiced and deferential when he wished, and he was experienced in adapting his conversation to his audience.

Drury was not at all pleased at Mrs. Luke Johns' attempt to ingratiate herself with Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, for he knew exactly its object. Again he cursed himself for having allowed his hands to be tied by assenting to the Johns' presence in the house as guests. It was, he felt, an odious situation; but if he warned Mrs. Dayrell-Wing now she would quite justly turn on him. He could do nothing—at least, not openly. But, as far as he was able, he was determined to protect her, and with that intention he left Ethel and hurried after

her. His manner gave Mrs. Luke Johns a hint that she was in the way, and, when it suited her, she could always take a hint. Pleading fatigue after her journey, she went indoors to rest until dinner.

Johns, returning from the hot-houses, noticed her absence and went to find her. He shut himself into his dressing-room, and tapped on the door which led into her room.

"Come," she called.

"You're tired?" he asked.

"A little. So was some one else."

"Anything?"

She nodded.

He withdrew into his own room, and, opening his suitcase, he took out the porcelain slate. Then, going back, he sat down beside her on the sofa.

Although the Luke Johns were not trained in detective methods, and were lacking in powers of scientific deduction, they had evolved for themselves a number of rules suited to the conditions of their work. One of the most important of these was based on the theory—which, if unsupported by natural history, is nevertheless true—that walls have ears. Their rule, accordingly, was that, as far as possible, they would never discuss the case of the moment within the danger zone except in the open air. Whatever had to be said indoors was written on the slate and sponged out immediately. Thus, the conversations between them at Gains which will be reported hereafter were not conversa-

tions by word of mouth, but were written on the slate.

Mrs. Luke Johns took the pencil from her husband and wrote:

"Watch Drury. He is in love with Mrs. Dayrell-Wing and gets mad when I speak to her."

"Will he tell her what we're after?" Johns wrote.

"He will, unless we're careful. Keep away from her."

There was a pause while Johns sponged the slate. Then she took it again and wrote:

"I don't fancy she did it."

"Why?"

"I put it to her straight and sudden in the motor. She didn't turn an eyelash."

"That's not evidence, if she's an old hand."

"She's not. She's a society fool."

"You're guessing."

Mrs. Johns laughed, saying:

"I always do."

Johns, who was very fond of his wife, and had a great admiration for her intelligence, laughed also. Then, becoming serious again, he wrote:

"Go on guessing, but don't forget the facts. I've looked at the rooms. The bolts and locks are O.K., and McVitie got it that both doors were bolted inside, and that no one got in by the windows."

"If you're swallowing McVitie's facts, it lies between her and Pfeiffer."

"We're not taking any of Pfeiffer."

"That leaves us with the woman. And I say she didn't do it."

"I say she did."

"I'd believe her rather than McVitie's facts. We know those police facts."

"I don't agree. I'd like to have time to follow her up. This is a fool's game, coming here for a week, and then dropping out."

"The fool's game is getting set on an idea because you can't find another one."

"Can *you?*"

"Not yet. Wait, and keep your eyes open. I don't say McVitie's facts aren't all right, but maybe he's holding them by the wrong end."

Luke Johns walked up and down the room for a minute. Then he sat down again and wrote:

"I'd like to look through her things. Guess I'll slip in and turn them over to-morrow."

"It's risky. There's such a lot of servants about."

"It's worth chancing. A letter or two might put us on the track."

"Very well; but I don't believe you'll find anything. If she's in it, she's a top-holer. There won't be anything lying about."

"What about Lil?" Luke Johns wrote, with a grin on his face.

Lil was a "top-holer" who had engaged the Luke Johns' attention a year or two before. Johns had called upon her, ostensibly to ask her to sit to a photographer, and while waiting in the drawing-

room he had discovered the secret drawer in her bureau containing some useful correspondence. Very few people ever learnt the reason of her sudden disappearance from the most exclusive circle of Boston society.

"All right. Have it your own way," Mrs. Luke Johns wrote.

"Then give me a nod when the road's clear."

While the Luke Johns were reviewing probabilities on their slate, Ethel Vawdrey was writing to Willie Pfeiffer. She had heard from him that morning, and his letter lay open before her:

"My Dearest:

"All the way up in the train I have been thinking what it can possibly be which has come between us. Some one has slandered me to your father—that is plain; and if I knew what was said, and who said it, I should act promptly. You know, and you won't tell me; and you send me away from you, though in the same breath you say you do care for me.

"I am accused of something by some one. Is that fair? Heaven knows I have committed follies and worse in my life, and for what I have done I can take my punishment as well as any man, after I've had a chance of defending myself. But I refuse to sit down under a nameless charge and surrender everything which means happiness to me.

"Put yourself in my position. Imagine that *I* had come to *you* last night and had said: 'I have heard something about you which I must not tell you. Until you disprove it we must part.' Would you not have insisted on knowing what it was? And should I not have been bound to tell you, unless I meant to make an excuse for getting rid of you? I cannot believe you meant to do that, for you were nothing but sweet and kind, and the very tone of your voice told me you were suffering as much as I was.

"Darling, for mercy's sake have mercy. I can face an accusation which is fairly made, and, if I cannot justify myself to you, I can kneel to you for forgiveness.

"You have sent me away, telling me to come back in six months. Have you thought what it means? Have you any conception what six months of life under the shadow of an unknown charge must be? And when it is over, I know too well what will happen. They won't let you marry me. This slander, whatever it is, is an absolute lie. They are simply gaining time, so as to put pressure on you and force your inclination.

"Oh, why do you let them? We were so happy, and you are letting them wreck our happiness forever. Darling one, break

away from it all and come to me. We can be married at once, and I swear you shall never have a day's regret. When it is done and settled your father will resign himself to the inevitable, and you can make it up with him. Darling one, come to me. A little courage, and we shall be together again. Surely, you won't hang back when we love each other as we do.

"Always your devoted,

"W. P."

Ethel found it a very difficult letter to answer. She had read it a score of times, and now, as she took up her pen, her eyes were full of tears. What he said was true. He ought to be told, but her father was insistent against it until the charge could be proved. She herself was positive that it never would be proved, because she believed passionately in her lover's innocence; and for this reason she agreed with her father that it was better not to tell him. Further inquiry would convince McVitie that he had made a mistake, and then the wretched thing would die a natural death. To marry Pfeiffer at once accorded much more with her inclination than to tell him about McVitie's suspicions; but she had promised her father not to do this, and she would not break her word. How, then, could she write so as to comfort her lover as she craved to do? She dashed the tears from her eyes, and began, at first slowly, and then with greater fluency:

"DEAREST:

"I want so to make you understand that nothing is altered between us, and that the difficulty which for the time is keeping us apart will very soon be over. Will you not be satisfied if I tell you that I love you as much and more than ever, and that my faith in you has never wavered and never will waver?

"You are right in saying that I ought to tell you why father sent you away. But I have promised him that I will not yet, and I think it is really better to say nothing when, in a few weeks, or even a few days, there will be no need to say anything.

"Do not think hardly of me for my silence, for I have as much as I can bear without the dread of losing your love. Be patient, and know always that in my heart you stand first and alone. When you know all you will forgive all.

"Good-by, dear,

"E. V."

Tom Vawdrey would have been seriously disturbed had he known that Ethel had written such a letter; for, in the event of Pfeiffer being arrested, it was essential that her name should be kept out of the scandal. He was counting upon Pfeiffer being tried and convicted, so that Ethel might be finally delivered from him. If, on the other hand, no further evidence could be obtained, Vawdrey

was determined to use all the force at his command to prevent her from marrying him. He looked forward to the necessity with anything but confidence, for he knew her spirit too well to feel certain of success; and although he kept a cheerful countenance before his guests his heart was heavy with anxiety.

CHAPTER VII

THE weather seemed to have taken a definite turn for the better, and the next morning the shooters made an early start. Luke Johns accompanied them, but he declined Vawdrey's offer of a gun, saying that he liked every one too much to put their lives in peril. In reality, he was far from being anxious to go, and long before he got back he was more tired than he had ever been in his life; but both he and his wife agreed that it would look more natural for him to join the other men.

"Say, Mr. Vawdrey," he said, as he sprawled in a deep chair, sipping a cup of tea, "I reckon I'll stay behind to-morrow if it's not putting you out. Heather's nice to look at, but give me a paved sidewalk for comfort."

Accordingly, on the following day he stayed in bed till noon, and then smoked a cigar on the lawn until lunch was ready. Mrs. Luke Johns had found a guide-book in the drawing-room, and, with the sight-seeing instinct of an American, she had whipped up Ethel to take her to a ruined castle some ten miles off. They must start at half-past two, and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing and Lady Benyon had agreed to accompany them. Thus, the way was left clear for Luke Johns to examine Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room, and not long after the car had started he went upstairs.

The room which she had occupied since the burglary was at the end of the left-hand corridor, beyond the turning which led to the wing and the back stairs. He walked slowly toward it, and stood for a moment looking out of the corridor window. Then he opened the door and went in. Turning the key in the lock, he began a systematic search.

He had been at work for nearly half an hour without finding anything of interest, and he had sat down at the writing-table with Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's travelling despatch case in front of him. The lock presented no difficulty, and he was beginning quietly to peruse the numerous letters which he found when suddenly his body stiffened.

Some one was coming along the corridor, and a voice, loud and high-pitched, said:

"It's too bad the car breaking down. I was just set on seeing that castle."

It was his wife, and it was Mrs. Dayrell-Wing who answered her.

Luke Johns' eyes narrowed into slits and the lines round his mouth deepened and grew taut. He was trapped, and his wife was giving him warning. There was no escape, and it was a million to one that Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was coming to her room. Quickly he pushed the letters back into the despatch case and snapped the lock. Then, with a tread even more catlike than usual, he went toward the door. Would his wife invent a pretext to get the

woman away? She was trying, for he heard her say:

"Oh, I promised to show you that lace I've got. Won't you come and see it now?"

Luke Johns held his breath for the answer.

"Thanks, but I'll just lay down my hat first," he heard. And a moment afterward the handle of the door turned.

"It's locked," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing exclaimed. "Céleste, are you in there?"

"Oh, it can't be locked," Mrs. Luke Johns said in a perfectly controlled voice. "It must have blown to and got stuck."

"It seems locked. There's one of the maids; I'll call her."

"Let me try," Mrs. Luke Johns said, taking hold of the handle.

Luke Johns was trapped. In less than a minute suspicion would be aroused, and some one would be summoned to break open the door. He went swiftly to the window, wondering if he could drop out unseen, but one of the gardeners was at work close at hand. He had but a few seconds to make up his mind—should he open the door and confess, or should he hold out as long as he could in the hope that some chance might favor him? He looked keenly about him as he reviewed the possibilities. His mind was strained to its utmost limit. A plan came to him which held some faint hope of success. At all events, it was better than immediate surrender, and in a flash his decision was taken.

He crept to the door and noiselessly turned the key backward. Then he dived under the bed.

His wife heard the click of the lock and guessed that he had made himself safe. She half turned the handle and pressed against the door, saying:

"My! It *is* stiff."

Then, turning it further and pressing again, she opened it.

"That's all right," she cried. "It was only stuck."

She looked into the room, and then stood aside for Mrs. Dayrell-Wing to pass.

"Thanks so much," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said. "I quite thought it was locked. I'll come along to your room in a minute or two."

Mrs. Luke Johns would have liked to have waited for her, but she could not very well do so, and with a farewell remark she went to her own room.

Luke Johns, flat on his back underneath the bed, wondered whether Mrs. Dayrell-Wing was suspicious. Her tone told him nothing. He could not see her, for the valance touched the floor all round, but he could hear her moving about. Then there was an interval of silence, terminated at length by a sound on the dressing-table. She had put something down—a comb or a brush probably.

As the minutes passed he became more at ease, for he inferred that she was satisfied that the door had not been locked. Otherwise, she would have looked about the room to see if any one were

hidden. His anxiety thus allayed, he was able to reflect that his search had been fruitless, and that he might have saved himself trouble and risk by taking his wife's advice. He had scarcely expected to find the necklace, for its possession would have been too great a danger; but he had hoped to light upon something of a compromising nature which would serve either as a clue or a weapon. His duty to his clients was to secure the withdrawal of the claim for twenty thousand pounds under the policy of insurance, and for that purpose evidence of a secret *liaison* might be as effective as the proof that the necklace had not been stolen. He knew how to play a good card, and so long as he earned the reward, he was not particular as to the means he adopted.

But he had found nothing. The drawers and cupboards contained only an unusual quantity of expensive clothes; in her jewel-case there were half a dozen rings and bracelets of considerable value; and so much of her correspondence as he had had time to read did not indicate a woman who lived on her wits or indulged in gallantry. He admitted that everything was in favor of her innocence, and he began to wonder whether McVitie was not right in following up Willie Pfeiffer.

His thoughts were recalled abruptly by Mrs. Dayrell-Wing pushing back her chair and walking across the room. His heart jumped as he wondered whether he had moved and so attracted her attention. But she opened the door and went out,

closing it behind her. He lay still for two or three minutes. Then he crawled from beneath the bed, listening for any sound of footsteps in the corridor. Reassured by the silence, he opened the door an inch, listened again, and walked out. He met no one, and went slowly downstairs into the hall. It was empty, and he passed on to the billiard-room, where he helped himself to a cigar and began to practise some of the fancy shots which Sir Charles had been showing him on the previous evening.

He was interrupted presently by Gibson, who told him that the shooters had returned and that tea was ready on the lawn.

"Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, I hope you enjoyed visiting the castle," he said, as he came up to the group round the table.

"But we never got there," his wife broke in. "The car collapsed."

"That so? Well, that was real vexatious."

"I don't think I minded particularly," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said. "The roads are so bumpy in Scotland."

"You mustn't run down Scotland before Mr. Johns," Fraser said rather maliciously. "His ancestors came from there."

"What's the matter with my ancestors?" Luke Johns retorted rather hotly. "Yours were Scotch, too, weren't they? Guess it ain't a disgrace to come from Scotland."

"None whatever. But mine made the mistake of staying here."

"I suppose they couldn't borrow enough for their fares on the *Mayflower,*" Vawdrey laughed.

"I've often wondered," Fraser answered. "And yet they borrowed such an awful lot for other purposes."

Luke Johns had turned away. He seemed more ruffled by Fraser's sarcasm than was necessary.

"Is any one going to play croquet?" Sir Charles asked. He was an enthusiast.

"Not I," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said. "I think it's such a dull game."

"Oh, come now!"

"It is. It takes me hours to get through a hoop."

"I think," Vawdrey said gravely, "that the game lost most of its attraction when ladies gave up wearing crinolines and white stockings."

"Father's remarks are always verging on the indelicate," Ethel put in.

"Skirting the indelicate," Fraser amended.

Sir Charles was the only one who had not laughed. Now he said slowly:

"Why are white stockings indelicate? I thought housemaids always wore 'em."

"My dear fellow," Vawdrey cried, "how do *you* know that?"

"Seen 'em cleaning the doorsteps," Sir Charles explained.

He appeared to be surprised at the shout of laughter which went up.

At dressing time, when the Luke Johns reached

their room, Mrs. Luke Johns turned to her husband with a question in her eyes. He fetched the slate at once and wrote on it:

"All safe."

"Where were you?" she wrote.

"Under the bed. Thanks be, she didn't look."

"She didn't suspect. I faked the door well."

"Grand!"

"I was frightened to death at coming back. I tried to keep her in the garden, and when she wouldn't, I screamed out as we went up the stairs, because I guessed you weren't through."

He grinned as he wrote: "When I heard you I was scared so soft you might have poured me out of a jug."

"Did you find anything?"

"Not a thing."

"I told you so."

"Reckon you're about right. I found her diary, but it's filled up with footling drivel about Drury. She means to marry him."

"Then that proves it. He's no catch for a high-flier."

"Still, I'm not dead certain. I kind of feel she isn't white all through."

"Well, stop now. We'll talk afterwards."

Luke Johns locked up the slate and began to put on his dress suit. His appearance in it would have thrown doubt on his Scotch ancestry, even if it had been supported by the entire College of Heralds.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH a change of partners, it fell out that Luke Johns took Mrs. Dayrell-Wing in to dinner. He found her absent-minded and disinclined to talk; and after one or two attempts he turned to Hilda Carew, who was sitting on the other side of him.

"I must compliment you, Miss Carew," he said, "if I may, on that shooting costume you wore today. Cunning, I call it."

"Do you? I should have thought serviceable was a better word."

"That's understood. But it didn't miss the charm of feminine adornment, either. In America, when you're told a woman looks serviceable, you may reckon she looks plain."

Hilda laughed as she answered:

"If all Americans are as polite as you are I'm sure they'd never tell her so."

"But they'd think it. In this world you think a lot of things which you don't say."

"And I'm afraid, Mr. Johns, you say a lot of things which you don't think."

"Now you're chaffing me, Miss Carew. I'll have to tell you the story of George Washington."

"Why? What's that got to do with it?"

"He couldn't tell a lie. That's rare, but I'm made the same way."

"Don't you find it inconvenient?"

"No more 'an George did. He was a bright boy, and he knew the best way out of a conversational dead-end when his father was reaching for a stick."

"Oh, I see. If there hadn't been a stick, George Washington would never have been President of America."

"That's stretching it; but I dessay the stick helped."

"Well, I don't think you're a bit like George Washington, and in any case I haven't got a stick; but you may as well take back 'cunning.'"

"But that's truth."

"What is?" Vawdrey asked. "Has any one been indiscreet?"

"Mr. Johns said that my shooting get-up was cunning," Hilda Carew answered. "Under cross-examination he admits that he meant I looked very plain in it; so I invited him to retract the adjective."

"Now, Miss Carew, you're acting unfairly. I've never in my life admitted that any lady looked plain. Ask my wife."

"Oh, he has an eye," Mrs. Luke Johns said.

"He has an eye," Vawdrey repeated. "So had Cyclops, but I never heard he was appreciative of the fair sex."

"Guess I've got two of everything needful," Johns protested.

"I said so—double-tongued," Hilda put in smartly.

"Well, there! I'm done either way. Seems to me I ought to be in Barnum's—one eye and two tongues; they'd give me a thousand dollars a week."

Every one laughed except Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, who was eating her dinner in silence. Vawdrey, noticing her aloofness, leant forward to rally her, saying:

"What's up, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing? You don't seem to find our poor friend's infirmities amusing."

"Oh, but they are, of course," she answered, rousing herself. "Only I was thinking of something else."

"Do unbosom. The thoughts of the heart are desperately——"

"I'm frankly bothered," she said, straightening herself in her chair and looking round the table.

Every one turned to her, their attention caught by the anxious note in her voice.

"There's something very odd about this house," she went on. "I don't understand it."

"Ghosts!" Vawdrey asked.

"I can't think so; they seem too intelligent. Ghosts wouldn't have taken my necklace."

"What do you mean? Have you lost anything else?" Vawdrey asked, suddenly grave.

Every one listened eagerly. The Luke Johns avoided each other's eyes. Their faces were per-

fectly controlled and gave no hint that they saw themselves on the edge of a catastrophe.

"Not as far as I know," Mrs. Dayrell-Wing answered. "But this afternoon, when we came back from motoring, I found I couldn't get into my room. At first I thought the door was locked, and I was going to call one of the maids. But it was only stuck, and Mrs. Luke Johns, who was with me, pushed it open. I didn't think anything of it; but this evening, before dinner, when I went to write a letter, I found my writing-case had been opened and my letters disturbed."

Vawdrey scowled and shot a keen glance at Luke Johns, who at that moment might have sat for a statue of innocence.

"Then some one *was* there?" Mrs. Luke Johns cried.

"Evidently, for I had been using my writing-case just before I went out."

"Didn't the door make you suspicious? Didn't you look about?" Lady Benyon asked.

"No, it never occurred to me. I thought the door *had* stuck."

"But it wasn't locked or I couldn't have pushed it open," Mrs. Luke Johns said.

"My dear, you must inquire about this," Vawdrey said to his wife.

"I can hardly think one of the servants——" she murmured.

"Did you ever suffer from predatory ghosts, Fraser, when you lived here?" Sir Charles asked.

"No," Fraser answered shortly.

Drury, whose face was as black as a thundercloud, was glaring at Luke Johns. Like Vawdrey, he guessed the explanation of the affair, and with less discretion he was on the point of denouncing the Johns forthwith. Johns perceived the danger and, looking him full in the face, said:

"Anyhow, the thief didn't get anything this time."

"No," Drury answered, "but I'd like to horsewhip him."

"Nothing was taken?" Mrs. Vawdrey asked.

"Not as far as I can see. My purse was in a drawer of the table, but that hadn't been touched."

"Oh, hadn't it!" Luke Johns said to himself.

"It's very distressing," Mrs. Vawdrey sighed. "I really don't know what to do. That detective who was here didn't seem to be of any use."

"They never are," Sir Charles said.

The crisis passed; but as the men came out from dinner Drury drew Luke Johns on one side.

"Look here," he said, "let me tell you, you're an infernal scoundrel. If it wasn't for my firm I should go straight to Mr. Vawdrey and have you turned out of the house."

"My dear sir," Johns remonstrated, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

"Oh, drop that. And take your hand off my arm."

"My dear sir, you're making a big mistake in

using that tone, and you'd make a bigger one still in turning me out of the house."

"I shouldn't make any mistake in knocking you down."

"Yes, you would. And I'll tell you why."

"I don't want to know why and I don't want to speak to you again. You'll be good enough to keep out of my way until you leave."

"With all the pleasure in life, Mr. Drury. But give me a minute to explain."

"Damn explaining," Drury cried, pushing past him.

Johns' mouth set more firmly, and the apologetic expression in his eyes changed in a flash to a determined ferocity. He caught Drury by the arm and swung him round with unexpected strength.

"See here," he said in a hard, biting tone. "If you spoil the game it don't matter to me near so much as it will to you. I'm put here by you and your partners to find that necklace, and I reckon I've got the best chance of any one. Well, give the show away and tell your partners you've done it if you're so set on it."

Drury was furious, but Luke Johns' eye quelled him; and, though he clenched his fist, he did not use it.

"You won't find the necklace by insulting Mrs. Dayrell-Wing," he said hotly.

"No, I sha'n't," Johns agreed in a milder tone. "Since I went through her room this afternoon I know that for certain; and I give you my word

of honor, I sha'n't interfere with her again. Does that satisfy you?"

"No, it doesn't. Nothing would, except to teach you a lesson you wouldn't forget in a hurry."

"My dear sir, do be reasonable. You've been right all along—I admit it and I apologize. But I had to go by my instructions. That's over, so why can't we work together?"

"You mean," Drury said, drawing back a step, "she's to be free from your attentions altogether?"

"Absolutely. She doesn't exist."

Drury hesitated for a moment. Then he said in a surly, unwilling voice:

"If you're speaking the truth, I won't for the present do anything to hinder you."

"Then we're friends. Shake."

"I don't think we need do that," Drury answered, stiffening.

"As you please, Mr. Drury," Johns said, with a laugh. "Leave me alone; that's all I want."

"And that's all you'll get. I don't like your methods, Mr. Johns, and, I may say, I don't particularly like *you*."

"Sorry," Johns answered indifferently, as they walked together toward the drawing-room.

When Luke Johns followed his wife to bed he found her waiting up for him, and he at once got out the slate. She took the pencil from him and wrote:

"Drury all but split on us at dinner. Have you settled him?"

"Yes," Johns wrote in his turn. "I stroked him down and promised to leave the woman alone."

"She wasn't worth the risk."

"I thought differently. You were right."

"Did Vawdrey say anything?"

"Not yet. Expect he will to-morrow."

"Are we safe?"

"I think so. But what's to be done next?"

"I see no pointer."

"Nor do I."

Mrs. Luke Johns took the pencil, but she thought for some moments before she began to write:

"Let's reason it out from the start," she wrote at last.

Luke Johns nodded assent.

"The necklace was taken from her room, which leads into Pfeiffer's room, same as these two do. Both passage doors were bolted inside, her windows were shut down, and McVitie claims that no one got in at Pfeiffer's window."

She stopped and looked at her husband, who nodded again.

"She lost it right enough. That's agreed," she wrote. "Then, on McVitie's facts it looks like Pfeiffer."

He took the pencil from her and answered:

"On McVitie's facts, yes. And, if they *are* facts, we're not on in this scene at all. But I'm not dead certain they are."

"I never was. That Scotch detective isn't springy enough."

"You're right. He's missed something. Anyway, his facts are no use to us, because we aren't concerned with Pfeiffer."

"Then we'd best forget them. We'll agree some one did get into the room and out again, though we don't know how."

"We'll agree. Who was it?"

They leant back and looked at each other. As they had said, they saw no pointer; for, assuming that McVitie was wrong, and that some one had got into the room, the field of inquiry became indefinitely enlarged. It was the more enlarged by reason of the great value of the necklace. Thousands of people are honest over a ten-pound note because it does not tempt them; but, as the prize increases, the pressure of temptation increases. A necklace worth twenty thousand pounds has a wide radius of attraction and may prove irresistible even to an archdeacon.

After a long pause Mrs. Luke Johns took up the pencil and wrote slowly:

"Let us confine ourselves to the people we are in touch with, ruling out all other possibilities, just the same as we've ruled out Pfeiffer and McVitie's facts. On that plan we rule out every one not in the house."

Luke Johns made a low sound of assent and watched her go on.

"We can't get at the servants, unless we have a

clue on any particular one. That leaves us with three Vawdreys, two Benyons, the Carew girl, Fraser, and Drury."

"Wipe out Mrs. Vawdrey," Johns wrote. "She hasn't got grit enough to steal a nickel. What's the matter with the daughter?"

"Not likely. She couldn't ever wear the necklace. How much do we know of Vawdrey?"

"Porton said he's worth two or three million pounds. No difficulties suggested, and it isn't more than a few months since he bought this house."

"Did you ask if he speculated?"

"I hinted it. Porton says he's high and dry above trouble."

"The Benyons—I asked Mrs. Vawdrey about them. He's a do-nothing fool, and owns miles of real estate in Manchester. Plays croquet most of his time. She drives around and spends the money. That frock she wore to-night cost five hundred dollars. Everything from Paris, and two pearls in her ears worth ten or fifteen thousand."

Johns deliberated. Presently he wrote:

"She looks genuine, but I'd like to know more. Find out who her friends are."

"I'll try; but she's rather beyond our reach."

"Who's Miss Carew?" Johns wrote, after another pause.

"Daughter of a rich business man."

"Fraser?"

"Don't know anything."

"He sold this house to Vawdrey, and talks

about being poor, so I guess he's got a sackful. He makes me sick. Did you hear him chip me about my ancestors?"

"That leaves Drury."

"He's in on the insurance, but his share isn't much."

Mrs. Luke Johns took the slate with a gesture of despair.

"Seems to me," she wrote, "we couldn't know less about them if they were Chinese. Any one of them might be in it, but there's nothing to tell."

"It's fair hopeless. Somehow I never thought we'd do any good to ourselves beyond getting a week's board."

"That's what it looks like. Still, keep your eyes open."

There was nothing more to be said, and they began to undress with the deepening certainty that the three thousand dollars' fee was not likely to be earned.

CHAPTER IX

IN the billiard-room that night, after Luke Johns had retired, Vawdrey took an opportunity of speaking to Drury.

"I say," he said, dropping into a chair beside him, "this is pretty hot of our American. I hardly know what to do about it."

"As far as I'm concerned, do whatever you like," Drury answered. "I hate the fellow, and I was always against his coming here."

"Well, but he's acting on your behalf," Vawdrey said, surprised at Drury's vindictive tone.

"On behalf of my firm, I suppose, and of the other underwriters. *I* didn't want him to come; but they thought it was a good thing to do and they wouldn't listen to me."

"Oh, I see. I thought you wanted it."

"Not a bit."

"I needn't say it's most distasteful to me. I only agreed because Porton made it a personal matter and because I didn't want to put difficulties in your way."

"You've been extraordinarily kind about it. But, for my own part, I'd much rather you had refused."

"I didn't know that. Of course, if your firm had seen McVitie first they wouldn't have gone to the expense of sending the Johns here."

"They wouldn't have sent them in any case but for a preposterous idea which some one started that the necklace hadn't been stolen at all."

"Not stolen? But what bosh!"

"They suspected Mrs. Dayrell-Wing."

"Good Lord!"

"Yes, it's abominable. Any one who knew her could have told them that."

"And that's why little Johns went through her letters. I say, I can't stand that. I think I shall tell him to clear out."

"It doesn't matter now whether you do or not. I had a pretty serious talk with him after dinner, and he professes to be satisfied about her, and says he won't interfere with her again."

"Who's he after next? I suppose he'll be rifling *my* writing-table."

"Heaven knows. I don't believe he's got a clue of any sort, and if you want to get rid of him you'd better do so."

"Well, I'll see. In any case, it's only a few more days; and, if I fire him out, he'll go back and say that I've prevented him from succeeding. By the way, I had a wire from McVitie this evening, saying he's coming here to-morrow. I don't know whether that means that he's got something definite. If he has, I think I'll tell Johns and his missis to move on."

Sir Charles Benyon, deserted by Fraser, who had gone to bed, now interrupted them.

"I've been askin' Fraser about the family spooks," he said. "There's a great-uncle who mur-

dered his wife; that's as near as any of 'em got to burglary."

"I suppose nothing less than a murder was considered gentlemanly," Vawdrey answered, smiling. "Even that fine profession, the road, was thought a trifle *infra dig.*"

"Lot of blackguards, *I* think, Turpin and his gang," Sir Charles remarked somewhat irrelevantly.

"No doubt; but how polite. Drury, I think business men like you and me might get a lot of wrinkles from the chronicles of the highwaymen. They possessed the art of extracting money from other people's pockets in the nicest possible way. No prospectus or guinea-pig directors; simply individual ability."

"But sometimes the gallows."

"Oh, well, yes. But now they wouldn't dare to give you more than six months in the first division; that's the maximum, unless you're a *very* clumsy thief."

"I'm off," Sir Charles said, with a yarn. "Shootin' to-morrow, I s'pose?"

"Rather. But I'll have to join you later; the detective is coming to see me."

After breakfast next morning Vawdrey was sauntering in the garden with Ethel when McVitie arrived. Gibson brought him out to them.

"Good morning," he said. "I had business in this direction, so I thought I'd call."

"Glad to see you. I don't think you met my daughter when you were here last."

Ethel barely acknowledged the introduction. McVitie, without a word, raised his hat an inch, and turned again to Vawdrey, saying:

"I'd like to speak with you when convenient."

"You can talk now. My daughter knows about the affair."

McVitie turned a cold eye upon her for a moment. He had no fancy for fashionable young ladies, and in his heart he called Vawdrey a fool for letting her know anything about the inquiry. He kept silent, meaning thereby to give her a second hint to withdraw. Vawdrey, however, said rather insistently:

"Well, I hope you have got definite information?"

Thus pressed, McVitie deemed it better not to make a mystery; and, in truth, he had nothing particular to say, and had only come to report progress and to find out what the Luke Johns were doing at Gains.

"We are doing all that is possible," he began with some reserve.

"What *are* you doing?" Vawdrey asked.

"We're making searching inquiries in London."

"Oh!"

"And we're keeping the suspect under close observation."

"Do you mean Mr. Pfeiffer?" Ethel asked in a

tone which gave McVitie the feeling that she had thrown a tumblerful of cold water in his face.

"I do."

"And what have you found out? We shall be particularly interested to know."

"We have found nothing at present, though we expect to do so. The man has been watched since his arrival in London; but he seems cautious, and is evidently waiting for a while before he gets in touch with his confederate."

Ethel flushed up hotly and turned upon McVitie, saying: "You seem very certain that there is a confederate. What are your reasons?"

McVitie felt the annoyance of a man who, in the middle of a discussion, is asked to explain some elementary principle. This, he thought, was what came of bringing women into a matter.

"Mr. Vawdrey knows my reasons," he answered coldly.

"If you haven't anything to add to what you told Mr. Vawdrey I can only say that I think them absurdly insufficient. From what he tells me, your only proof against Mr. Pfeiffer is that you can't see how any one else got into the room."

"I did not say I couldn't see," McVitie answered, with a sensible decrease in politeness. "I said it was impossible for any one to have got in."

"I think it's very much the same thing; you mean you couldn't find a better explanation. That doesn't prove there wasn't one."

"No; and I'd be glad of any plausible suggestion. It's easy to criticise."

"It may be easy," Ethel rapped out, "but sometimes it's useful."

McVitie drew in a trifle and spoke more mildly.

"I should be as pleased as any one," he said, "to clear Mr. Pfeiffer. But at present my duty is to follow up the clues I have. I think you will agree there."

"Perhaps. But I cannot compliment you on the way you are doing it. You may be interested to hear that Mr. Pfeiffer is quite aware he is being watched."

"Have you warned him?" McVitie asked sharply.

"I have not."

"Then some one else has."

"No one except your clumsy detectives themselves. I've just had a letter from him, and this is what he says."

She opened the letter which she was holding in her hand and read:

> "Everything is so puzzling. . . . I am almost certain that I am being shadowed. Three or four times I have seen the same man loitering in Jermyn Street, and to-day at the club, when I looked out of the window, he was on the opposite side of the road. I am waiting for a chance of tackling him."

McVitie frowned and fingered his moustache. To himself he said: "They've put a fool on the job."

"If Mr. Pfeiffer's conscience was easy he mightn't take so much notice," he remarked aloud.

Ethel folded the letter and walked away.

When she had left them Vawdrey said:

"I suppose there's still no doubt in your mind? The thing's serious, because, as you may have guessed, Mr. Pfeiffer is rather an intimate friend."

"I supposed so, from Miss Vawdrey's attitude," McVitie answered sourly. "I have no doubt that he stole the necklace."

"I must say, he's the last man in the world I should have suspected of it."

"It generally is."

"You are quite sure, then?"

"As far as it's possible to be. I'm not going on surmise; there's the proof that no one else had access to the room."

"So you say."

McVitie saw that Vawdrey was still doubtful, and his intolerance of unofficial stupidity made him add:

"I can't drop the matter now. We intend to prosecute."

Vawdrey did not like his tone and answered sharply:

"It's time enough to talk of prosecution when you've got some one to prosecute."

"You have no cause to be dissatisfied. No time is being wasted."

"Oh, I didn't suggest that," Vawdrey answered more quietly. "Perhaps I'm a little impatient, but naturally we're all rather upset."

McVitie's irritation subsided. In professional matters he liked to keep "the public," as he called the victims of a crime, in their place, and he was pleased at having had the opportunity of checking Vawdrey's interference.

"I infer your American inquiry agents have not picked up anything?" he asked in a dry, sarcastic voice.

"No, confound 'em! I wish they'd never come," Vawdrey answered.

"You remember I wasn't consulted. I might have advised you against them."

"I suppose you would."

"We don't rely on people of that kind."

"Ah!"

Vawdrey was bored by McVitie's official egotism and showed it by the monosyllable.

"Well," McVitie drawled, in his intolerable Scotch manner, "I'll just see him before I leave."

He thought it would do no harm to make Luke Johns admit that he was doing nothing.

"Here he comes," Vawdrey said, calling to Johns as he appeared on the terrace.

Luke Johns approached without undue eagerness. He had not heard that McVitie was expected, or he would have kept out of the way; for

just then McVitie was one of the last people in the world whom he wished to see. He was feeling, as he expressed it, low. He and his wife had come to Gains without much expectation of earning the reward, but there had been a possibility of doing so sufficient to give an incentive to work, and as the possibility vanished, his spirits fell. McVitie's presence did not make him any happier. "I told you so," is hard to hear in any language; in a drawling Scotch accent it is exceptionally hard.

"Mr. McVitie would like a word with you before he goes," Vawdrey said, as he turned on his heel.

"How are you?" Johns said, with affected heartiness. "Reckon you've brought some news?"

McVitie put forward a limp hand, saying:

"I'm well, thank you, Mr. Johns. I thought I'd ask if you've been making progress."

"I should say some. But we're not through yet."

"Indeed?"

"How's *your* end panning out?" Johns asked, with an air of patronizing encouragement which took the edge off McVitie's self-confidence.

"We're just going slowly, a point at a time."

"Well, that's a good rule, if you can't take two together."

"We official detectives have to work carefully."

"That's so. Look three times, and then don't leap if you can help it."

"I take it, you've got nothing to tell me?" McVitie asked, ignoring the criticism.

"Well, we've proved you right in one thing."

"What's that?"

"The necklace *was* stolen."

A contemptuous smile crossed McVitie's face.

"You're making sure of your groundwork," he said. "I was thinking you'd have got farther, perhaps."

"I'm real sorry to disappoint you. I didn't know you were counting on us. Must you go? I'll see you later, perhaps."

On the whole, Luke Johns was not sure that he had come off worst in the encounter.

CHAPTER X

TIME went slowly by at Gains, undisturbed by any events except the daily shooting expedition and the long dinner which followed in the evening. The spirits of the party showed a tendency to rise, as the robbery ceased to be a topic of conversation; but they came short of their former riotous gaiety. Pfeiffer, leader of the revels, was missed, and the Luke Johns were too evidently strangers not to cause a feeling of restraint. As Hilda Carew said to Lady Benyon, intelligent conversation was handicapped when every one was on the lookout for Mr. Johns' next Americanism.

Ethel, too, had hard work to appear cheerful and perform her duties as the daughter of the house. She heard once or twice from Pfeiffer and answered his letters, but, on her father's advice, she ignored what he said about being watched, and would not refer to McVitie's allegation against him. Vawdrey had counselled her that it was better to let things take their course for the present, and she was so certain of his innocence, and of its speedy vindication, that she too believed it wiser to keep silence. But in the meantime she was very unhappy.

Luke Johns and his wife were past-masters in the art of keeping their ends up, and they showed themselves ready to make cheerful conversation at

any hour. Failing other listeners, they would talk to Gibson, or to a housemaid, or to one of the gardeners, and they collected an astonishing amount of information about every one. No trifle seemed too insignificant to excite their interest, and in one way or another their receptive attitude induced most people to say more than they intended. But, when all was said, they found nothing that would serve as a clue to the robbery, and in their bedroom the writing on the slate was lugubrious enough. The three thousand dollar fee, never a very substantial possibility, had faded like the glow of a fine sunset. And, like a sunset, the more it faded the more attractive it seemed.

"We ought to spot it," Luke Johns wrote one night. "I'd take my oath some one here knows about it. It doesn't strike me as an expert job."

"There's nothing to start on," Mrs. Luke Johns' pencil answered.

"Well, think."

"I *am* thinking. I've thought till my head bursts."

"So have I. I've walked round those rooms till I'm dizzy, and I can't see how any one got in unless it was old Nick himself. If we tumbled to that we might get the rest."

With a sigh he rose and put the slate away. An insoluble mystery, with those three thousand dollars hanging to it, was enough to take one's appetite away.

One thing, indeed, they learnt, which seemed to

throw some light on the robbery; but, while it strengthened their belief in Pfeiffer's innocence, it gave no clue definite enough to help them. The information came from Hilda Carew, who, when talking to Luke Johns one night after dinner, mentioned the subject of practical jokes.

"They're silly, but they're rather amusing," she said. "We had some here when we first came. Mr. Pfeiffer, who was here then, is rather good at them and quite conscienceless. He hid Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's diamond necklace and pretended it had been stolen; but as it *was* stolen the day after, that rather put the lid on jokes."

"That's queer," Johns said, with quick interest. "He hid it?"

"Yes. There was a fearful fuss—Mrs. Dayrell-Wing almost in tears and every one rushing about. They kept it up for half an hour, until Mr. Vawdrey, who was in the secret, said he wasn't going to wait dinner any longer."

"Well, in America I reckon a man would be well horsed for less than that. It wouldn't strike us as humorous to make a woman cry."

"Oh, in Mr. Vawdrey's house you may do anything in the name of ragging. When I was staying with them last year in Yorkshire there was a wretched youth who used to blush if you looked at him. We gave him a wretched time. One night we took away all his pajamas—and he had such lots of them, all different colors."

Luke Johns grinned, saying:

"Guess he blushed all over them."

"Guess he did," Hilda answered, laughing. "Only we weren't there to see."

"You seem experienced, Miss Carew. You might post me up some."

"We had a splendid scoop against Mr. Pfeiffer. That was before he hid the necklace, and we were always chaffing him because he snored."

"How did you know he snored?"

"Mrs. Dayrell-Wing said so. She declared she could hear him through the wall. So Miss Vawdrey bought twelve alarm clocks—that brassy, American sort, you know."

"I know. The kind you let off when your mother-in-law dies, just to make sure she's expressed through."

"We wound them all up and set them for every hour from two to six. And then we stuck them about his room, under the bed and in the cupboards. And he slept through the whole twelve!"

Johns' expression suddenly changed, and the laughter died out of his face.

"Say, you're joking?" he asked.

"It's a fact. Ask Miss Vawdrey."

Johns became silent and preoccupied and seemed so little inclined for further conversation that Hilda presently left him.

Later, upstairs, he and his wife covered the slate many times over in discussing the clocks. They agreed that the incident went to Pfeiffer's credit in so far as it supported the idea that some one had

entered his room without waking him. They agreed, too, that either McVitie did not know about it or that he was a bigger fool than they thought.

But beyond that it did not carry them far, because they were still unable to discover how the rooms had been entered. The evidence that the doors were locked came from Pfeiffer and Mrs. Dayrell-Wing, and was, therefore, beyond question; and the absence of footmarks on the gravel, proving that no one had come through the windows, was a point on which McVitie would certainly be trustworthy. Thus, although they doubted his inferential fact that no one had got into the room, their common sense obliged them to accept his basic facts about the doors and the windows. While admitting that everything was against it, they still believed that some one had got in; but the solution of the puzzle—if there *was* a solution—was too hard for them.

"There's one thing, Mrs. Johns wrote. "Whoever did it knew about those clocks. He knew he could go through Pfeiffer's room without waking him."

"Agreed. And that means it was some one in the house—a servant or a guest."

"And that means it's still up to us to get that reward. McVitie's chasing moonshine; no one has left the house except Pfeiffer. This is the place to watch."

"And we'll go on watching. What's wanted is a bit of luck."

CHAPTER XI

THE day for the break-up of the party was approaching. The Benyons were going further north, Hilda Carew to an uncle in Yorkshire, Mrs. Dayrell-Wing to Aix-les-Bains, and Drury back to his work at Lloyds. Fraser, too, was going to London on the way to join his mother at Dinard, where she had a villa. Another set of guests was expected at Gains on the day of departure.

Every one was to leave on Monday. On the Sunday morning Luke Johns declined Mrs. Vawdrey's invitation to go to church and remained by himself in the garden. His temper had shortened with his shortening visit, and, as he paced to and fro chewing the end of his cigar, he indulged in an assortment of American profanity which would have interested a collector of strange words. If concentration of mind and will could have torn the secret of the necklace from the walls of Gains they would have spoken; but, although walls have ears, mercifully for some of us they have not tongues.

"I'd bet all I've got in the world," Johns soliloquized, "some one got into that room. That's leaping—'surmising,' that blinking idiot McVitie would say. So it is; and if you don't leap you don't grab the other fellow right. Some one got into that room. And how? Couldn't have passed

himself through the keyhole, couldn't have squeezed down the chimney without making a mess, couldn't have climbed through the window without showing a hoofmark on the new gravel. Looks as if the necklace was pinched by a bad smell—that's about the only thing as'll get through anything."

He spat vigorously and resumed.

"She says her door was bolted. S'pose it wasn't. That means she opened it to let a feller in, and then swore she hadn't, to save her reputation. Drury's her *beau,* but her letters and her diary are all against the quick and easy. Was she carrying on with any one else? Not much. Since I've been here she's been sitting as near Drury's lap as manners'll let her."

"Come back to it," he broke out again, after a period of thought. "There's nothing to hitch her on to it. I ought to know a straight woman when I see one, and I b'lieve she *is* straight. And there we are back at the start again. Seems to me, even Solomon in all his glory wouldn't put his finger on this."

He was interrupted by the return of the churchgoers, and Vawdrey joined him in a stroll across the lawn.

"I'm afraid your visit hasn't been so successful as you hoped," Vawdrey said, taking the opportunity for a farewell conversation.

"P'r'aps not," Johns answered. "Though we've proved who *didn't* do it."

"Well, that's something. But what we're all anxious to know is who did do it."

"Agreed; we've missed that."

"I'm sorry—both for you and for us. I'd give a good deal to be certain."

"Certainty's a jewel. And it's hard to catch when you don't have a bit of luck somewhere."

"At all events, I hope you and Mrs. Johns have had a pleasant time," Vawdrey said in a friendly tone. "You must bring a gun when you come again."

"Thanks."

Silence fell, and Vawdrey, feeling that he had done what politeness demanded, was going in to write some letters before lunch.

They turned at the edge of the lawn and walked slowly back toward the house. Luke Johns, with his hands in his pockets, was still chewing the wet stump of his cigar. His quick, mobile eyes roved over the house, as if in a last attempt to tear the secret from it. They roved from end to end, above and below; they halted at Pfeiffer's window, moved on and went back again. Suddenly they narrowed, and a gleam of light flashed from them. His mouth opened and closed with a snap, so that the long line of his lips looked like a taut steel wire. He stopped and caught Vawdrey by the arm, saying:

"Say, who sleeps in those garrets?"

Vawdrey was startled. The change in Luke Johns' bearing and tone struck him as remarkable. He looked at him, wondering what had happened

to alter him so completely in the few seconds since he said "Thanks."

"Eh?" he said.

"Who sleeps in those garrets?"

"In those garrets? Servants, I suppose. I don't think I've ever been up there."

"Who sleeps in that one?" Johns asked peremptorily, pointing to the closed window above Pfeiffer's.

"I haven't an idea. I can find out, if you like."

Johns cooled down as rapidly as he had caught fire.

"Don't worry," he answered, with indifference. "It's no matter. I just wondered."

Vawdrey left him at the edge of the terrace and went indoors.

Johns continued his walk, saying softly to himself:

"A bit of luck at last. Holy Moses, if it's only right!"

At luncheon a discussion arose as to what should be done in the afternoon. Some were in favor of a walk; others preferred the motor, and Mrs. Vawdrey headed a minority who spoke of "resting during the warm part of the day."

"I'm with you, Mrs. Vawdrey," Johns said. "A snooze after a big meal's better'n a full-size bottle of cure-all."

"What's cure-all?" Sir Charles asked.

"One of the advertising drugs that fits you like

a ready-to-wear suit. If you've got a pain in your head, buy it; and if you've got a pain in your feet, buy it. And if you haven't got a pain anywhere, don't worry—buy it, and you'll soon have one."

"Well, whatever you all do, please remember that the parson is coming to tea," Mrs. Vawdrey said.

"Oh, lor'! We shall have to behave," Vawdrey groaned.

"Yes, father, please don't shock him this time," Ethel put in.

"I shock him? I shouldn't dream of it."

"Well, you did before, when you told him the story about Moses and the sausages. He turned quite pink."

"All right, I'll be as careful as a mother's meeting and I hope you'll all play up to me. Lady Benyon, pray set a watch upon your lips. If Moses and the sausages turned him pink, one of your witty remarks might suffuse—that's right, isn't it?—suffuse our reverend friend with purple."

"Oh, I'm quite good at talking to the clergy, though paying visits gets one out of it rather."

"That's one to you, Lady Ben," Drury laughed.

Mrs. Luke Johns had elected to join the motorists, and her husband had no opportunity for a private word with her before she started. Knowing him as she did, she had noticed at luncheon that his cheerfulness rang more true than before, and she wondered if he had discovered anything which might bring the three thousand dollars nearer to

their grasp. He saw her off with a nod and a smile, and soon afterward, when the walking party had set out, he went to his room with the ostensible object of getting the snooze which he professed to value so highly.

But with the door shut, he showed himself anything but sleepy. He did not even glance at the sofa. He hung restlessly about, picking his teeth, and from time to time looking at his watch. Presently he changed his boots, hesitating for a moment between the black slippers with felt soles and some thin patent-leather boots with elastic sides, which he was accustomed to wear with dress clothes. He chose the latter, and going to the door he opened it and looked out into the corridor. No one was in sight, and he walked noiselessly along until he came to the staircase. A footman was removing the coffee cups in the hall below, and Luke Johns stood watching him until he disappeared through the door which led to the pantry. Then he moved on to the end of the corridor.

He stopped at the door which gave upon the back staircase. He put his ear to it and, hearing no sound, he opened it and passed through. The stairs led from the ground floor to the attic, and he mounted quickly. At the top he found himself facing a long passage, which corresponded to the one on the first floor. He listened for any sound of movement or voices, but all was still; and he went forward, counting the doors on his right hand. He stopped before the sixth and peered through

the keyhole. Then he opened the door and went in.

The room was a good sized attic, with a sloping roof, and a dormer window looking over the park. It was unfurnished, and was littered with empty packing-cases and straw, which had been used to bring the Vawdreys' pictures and china from Yorkshire. The boxes were heaped one upon another, some with the lids half torn off, others with broken or bent nails projecting from the edges.

Johns looked round, his keen eyes noting the disorder. Then he crossed the room to the window. The tree he had marked was in a line with it, and he knew that he was immediately over Pfeiffer's room.

The window was a double casement, divided in the middle by a stout wooden post, into which the catches fastened. Outside, the slope of the roof ran down to the gutter, some three feet below the sill, and beyond was a stone coping a foot or more in height.

Johns opened both sides of the window. Like the rest of the house it had been painted recently; but at the lower part of the centre post the paint was rubbed and dirty.

He bent down and examined the abrasion closely, passing his fingers up and down the post several times.

"That's right," he said to himself. "That's A 1 right. The luck's turned at last."

He closed the window and began to look about

the room. In a corner he came upon a pile of rope, odd lengths which had come off the packing-cases. He lifted out some of them, and presently he laid three of the longest pieces side by side on the floor. In each piece, at intervals of about two feet, were the marks of a knot which had been tied and untied, leaving a twist in the rope.

"That's right. That's A 1 right," he repeated happily.

He rolled up the ropes and put them back in the corner. Then he went downstairs to his bedroom.

CHAPTER XII

THE motor being late, and the clergyman early, Mrs. Luke Johns did not go upstairs on her return; but in the hall, as her husband handed her a cup of tea, he gave her the agreed signal which meant that he had something to communicate. So, when the others made a move for the gardens, she remained behind, and presently went to her room.

Luke Johns soon joined her, and when he laughed she broke out excitedly:

"Never! Have you?"

He fetched the slate, and they sat down together on the sofa. She leant over him, watching the words come from his pencil.

"I've tumbled to it," he wrote. "And it's just as simple as a good scheme always is."

She smiled widely and squeezed his arm to make him go on.

"I was thinking it over this morning in the garden. I felt certain there was a pointer sticking out somewhere if I could only see it. And I couldn't. Then Vawdrey came along, and walked me up and down, and asked me what I'd done. That made me madder than ever."

Mrs. Luke Johns snatched the pencil from him and wrote:

"Cut all this."

Johns grinned from ear to ear, as he went on with his story:

"We were walking toward the house. Vawdrey had shut up, and I was back again with Pfeiffer. Those clocks worried me some, because any one who knew about them knew he'd be safe not to wake him. Knowing that, he wasn't such a mug as to stay outside; but I couldn't see how he got in."

Johns cleaned the slate with irritating slowness before he went on:

"I knew it was easy; they don't keep magicians in Scotland. That's what worried me worst—it was a dam-fool children's puzzle and I couldn't fit it together. And then, in half a sec, it came to me. The chap let himself down from the garret window."

Mrs. Luke Johns clapped her hands softly in applause; then she put her arm round his neck and kissed him.

"Have you made good?" she whispered.

"Yes," he wrote. "This afternoon I found the rope and the marks on the window where it was tied. The garret's empty, except for rubbish and old packing-crates."

"Grand! Now, let's think. Pfeiffer's out of it. Who's left in?"

"All the rest of the world until we get a step further."

"It was a man."

"Almost certain."

"Narrow it down. It was some one in the house

or with a pal in the house; because he knew he could get from one room to the other, and the door between was unbolted beforehand."

"Agreed."

"He knew about the clocks, too. It would have been too risky otherwise, without drugging Pfeiffer."

"Agreed. There was a big risk if Pfeiffer woke, because there isn't any way out from the garret except by the one staircase."

Mrs. Luke Johns sat thinking. Presently a fresh link of the chain took shape in her mind and she wrote:

"If the clock business has any bearing it was some one in the house who took the necklace."

Johns raised his eyes in interrogation, and she went on:

"It only happened the night before. If it put him up to the job, as seems likely, it must have been some one in the house. No expert would be hanging round in a 'back-block' place like this waiting to see his way."

"That's right," Johns wrote. "This thing was hatched out hot and quick, and done right off. I don't believe it was done by an expert."

"Nor do I. It never did look professional. If they'd hocussed Pfeiffer it would have done; but they banked on his being a sleeper, and *I* think the clocks gave them the certainty."

"I agree. That limits it to some one indoors."

Both of them remained silent for some minutes,

trying to forge the next link in the chain. It was again Mrs. Luke Johns who took up the pencil.

"This isn't servants," she wrote unconsciously, adopting the argument which Shaw used to McVitie. "It's too big. No servants' fence would touch that necklace."

Luke Johns demurred.

"That wouldn't prevent a servant taking it. Besides, one of them may be in with a top-hole crook."

"Well, go through them. There's Gibson—the rope isn't made which would lower him down. And there's two footmen—both of them have lived with Vawdrey for over a year. That doesn't look criminal."

"No. P'r'aps you're right—anyway, right enough to let it stand for a bit."

"That leaves — Vawdrey, Benyon, Fraser, Drury. I think Vawdrey's genuine."

"I, too. Fraser's a stinker—I'd like it to be him. Benyon's doubtful—seems rich; but his wife throws it about. Drury? I rather fancy Drury."

"There's no telling. Seems as if it's one of the three."

"Drury's going to marry her. That's in his favor."

"Why? He may have to square up first. Somebody's got a pull on him, perhaps. He didn't want us here."

"That's so, but he gave a reason."

"It's easy to fake a reason if you've wits enough to steal a necklace."

The conversation came to a halt, and after a minute Luke Johns got up and began to pace to and fro. He bit the end off a cigar and struck a match. Mrs. Luke Johns drew her feet up on the sofa and closed her eyes. For some time there was unbroken silence. At last, pausing in his walk, Johns stood beside his wife. She looked up at him, her forehead puckered in thought, and held out her hand.

"Seems as if we're still outside the gate," she said.

Johns picked up the slate again and sat down beside her.

"If we're on in this act," he wrote, "it's got to be one of those three. And we don't know enough about them to find the winner."

"We can't stick here, now we've come so far," Mrs. Luke Johns wrote.

"If we'd only more time I'd go through their things. Reckon I'd find something illuminating."

"Let me think. Go downstairs and chat a bit. I'll hit on something before dinner."

Luke Johns, who, with reason, had great faith in his wife's powers of unravelling a knot, patted her hand and left the room.

The clergyman had just gone, and Sir Charles was canvassing for croquet players.

"You'll play?" he said to Johns, after trying elsewhere in vain for a fourth.

"Me? No, thanks. I've no use for those narrow loops."

Ethel was eventually sacrificed, and Johns joined Fraser and Hilda Carew in a raid on a plum tree.

"I love plums," Hilda said, as she bit into her second.

"Pity they've got a stone. They'd be so much pleasanter without," Fraser answered, as he watched Luke Johns expel a stone from his mouth with the force of a gun.

"You can't have perfection. You must take the good and reject the evil."

" 'Reject' is excellent. Ordinary people, like Mr. Johns and myself, would have said: 'Spit out.' "

Johns gave him a sour glance, but said cheerfully:

"What's the matter with the name so long's you don't swallow it?"

"Oh, I agree," Fraser said smoothly. "Rejection, under any name, is the only essential."

"I once swallowed a fish-bone, quite a large one," Hilda said.

"Were you X-rayed?"

"No; I was slapped."

"Well, there's a good deal to be said for the old-fashioned remedies. Slap the child and cheat the devil, doesn't somebody say?"

"I never heard it; but it sounds familiar."

"Solomon—on an off day, p'r'aps," Johns remarked.

When Luke Johns returned to his room his wife signed to him to bring the slate and wrote:

"It strikes me this way. We think one of these three men was the thief. We don't know any of them as crooks, and they all have good reputations. There was a thought-out plot, because the door between the rooms was unbolted beforehand; but that doesn't prove an expert hand. Any one might have carried this through."

Johns assented, and his wife went on:

"Whoever did it, started from the clock affair. He had seen the necklace night after night. Probably he was in a tight place; anyway, he wanted to lay hold of it. He'd been thinking how useful it would be, and then the clocks came along and started him off. He was quicker than you and me, because he found out how to get into Pfeiffer's room. And after that, all he had to do was to unbolt the inside door between dinner and bedtime and the road was open."

"That sounds right," Johns wrote. "Seeing's coveting, when you want money; and I guess he didn't loiter soon as the clocks showed him the way."

Mrs. Luke Johns paused for some minutes before she took up the pencil again.

"If we're going right, what would he do with it?" she wrote. "He's got no friends in the trade to help him pass it, and he'd be bound to move around and sell it himself. He hasn't done that yet, so he's still got it."

Luke Johns took the pencil from her and wrote:

"He might post it off, addressed to himself."

"He might, only he'd be scared. He's got no experience; doesn't know what he can or can't do. Well, then—either he hides it somewhere here or keeps it on him."

"Perhaps."

"Come down to that. He knows there'll be detectives ferreting round; maybe every one'll be searched. So he doesn't want it in his trunks."

Johns nodded more appreciatively.

"Then he keeps it in his pocket, or, much more likely, puts it somewhere safe. If he's got sense he wants a place where, if it *is* found, it won't drag him in."

"Agreed. He'd want to lay off the risk."

"Just so. And he had sense, because he put the empty case under the woman's doormat, which is the cutest thing he could have done."

She paused, waiting for him to digest her reasoning. After a minute's reflection he assented; and she went on:

"If he put it somewhere safe, he's got to fetch it back again. When? As soon as the detective is through? That's days ago. But if he's got sense he might leave it where it was till he was going away."

Johns eagerly seized the pencil and wrote:

"He'll fetch it to-night sure."

Mrs. Johns laughed softly. They had so often worked out puzzles together, and what McVitie

called "surmising" always amused her. Long practice had given her a delicate sense in weighing probabilities, so that she had grown to have confidence in her own powers. She took the pencil from her husband and wrote:

"We'll watch to-night. It's a fair chance and it's the last one we've got."

"Wish we had a few more days."

"Wishing won't alter it. We're booked for to-morrow's train, and so is every one else. If we don't pull it off to-night there's only one thing left. But I don't think it'll go."

"What's that? Bluff?"

"You can't bluff the three of them. No; we can put the cards on the table with Vawdrey and call for a search. But the case isn't strong enough."

Luke Johns shook his head.

At that moment the dressing-gong sounded.

CHAPTER XIII

AT dinner Mr. and Mrs. Luke Johns exerted themselves to be even more agreeable than usual, and no one would have supposed that in their minds they were accusing one of the company of being a thief. Mrs. Johns listened intently to Sir Charles's interminable description of a croquet match, and Luke Johns put his dislike of Fraser behind him and answered his banderilla remarks with good-humored meekness. Even Drury felt them to be less oppressive than before, and, in anticipation of soon being free from them, found it possible to be almost tolerant.

Mrs. Dayrell-Wing went early to bed, pleading to-morrow's journey; and the others followed soon afterward. Luke Johns stayed in the billiard-room for half an hour, and when he got to his room his wife had undressed. She was making her toilet in preparation for the night watch, and she looked surprisingly different from the elegant little person whom Sir Charles had taken in to dinner. She had shaken down her hair and redone it in a hard knot; and, in place of the tight black frock covered with yellow sequins, she was putting on a thick flannel petticoat and bodice and a serge dress which hung several inches from the ground. Her very pretty feet were shod most unbecomingly in sand-shoes.

Johns smiled at her with approval in his eyes.

They had kept watch together before, and he knew how useful she was, both in the certain tedium of waiting and in the possible moment of emergency.

He began rapidly to take off his dress clothes, stripping down to his vest. Then, unlocking his suitcase, he took from it what he called his burgling outfit—a gray flannel shirt, old black trousers, a Cardigan jacket with sleeves, and black felt slippers. His appearance in these clothes was certainly not that of a man whom one cares to meet on a lonely road. He looked a malefactor, and a powerful one, for his sinewy arms showed thick under the stretched woollen sleeves. Into one side-pocket he slipped his electric torch; into the other a revolver, fully charged.

His wife stood waiting for him, and when he was ready she placed two chairs near the door and softly drew back the bolt. Johns blew out the candles and sat down. Then he felt for the door-handle and turned it cautiously, opening the door an inch. The passage outside was in darkness.

They sat perfectly still, hand in hand. Now and again they exchanged a slight pressure of the fingers, as a precaution against falling asleep. The silence of the house was complete, save when it was broken at each half-hour by the chiming of the hall clock, which seemed to occur at enormous intervals of time.

To amuse himself, Luke Johns began to plan what he would do with the reward if they earned it. Things had not been going too well lately;

they had had one or two failures, and, in consequence, money had been coming in slowly. One of their reasons for taking a holiday had been that they both felt used up and in need of a change of scene to give them renewed capacity for work. With three thousand dollars in hand they would be free from worry; they could stay in Europe for a while longer, and when they got home they would not feel themselves at the point of the bayonet. They would have a fortnight in Paris and do the restaurants.

Mrs. Luke Johns, more prudent than her husband, was concentrating her mind on the theft. She was fully aware that they had not yet "made good," and no less aware that the most carefully laid plans often break down. They were dealing with probabilities, not with certainties, and she asked herself what should be done if they failed to lay hands on the necklace to-night. She could find no satisfactory answer, for she was sure that Vawdrey would not sanction a search, if for no other reason than because it would show that he had admitted detectives into the house to spy upon his guests. Rather than that, she thought, he would let the thief escape, saying that he had done all, and more than all, that could be expected of him.

The hall clock struck two. It seemed to her that she had been sitting there for several hours, and she judged that, if nothing happened soon, they were wasting their time. She was growing despondent and very sleepy, and she made up her mind

to wait only for another half-hour. Suddenly, the silence of the night was broken by the creak of a door. It was faint and cautious, but it did not escape the practised ears which were listening for it. Johns pressed his wife's hand firmly.

There was a pause of a few seconds. Then the door creaked again: it was being opened wider. Johns rose to his feet, and, secure in the knowledge that he had oiled the hinges of his own door when he arrived, he swung it slowly back. The creaking, he judged, was not far away.

He looked out, and, as he looked, a figure carrying a candle came from one of the rooms and went noiselessly along the corridor, past the head of the staircase. Johns followed it, keeping well behind in the darkness. It stopped at the door which led to the back staircase, opened it carefully, and passed through.

Johns quickened his pace. He saw the flicker of the candle on the upper flight and went on. He crept upstairs, keeping close to the wall, and reached the top in time to see the figure disappear into one of the garrets. His heart throbbed with excitement, for he knew it was the garret over Pfeiffer's room.

"The luck's holding!" he thought exultantly. "The luck's holding, by gum!"

He waited for a moment, and then moved forward. The door was open, and as he came to it he put his hand in his pocket and took out his revolver. Then he stepped in.

The candle was set upon the floor. Beside it a man dressed in pajamas was stooping down. His arm was thrust into one of the empty packing-cases which lay about the room. Presently he withdrew his arm and stood up. He turned slowly round, looking intently at something in his hand.

The man was Leslie Fraser.

Johns lifted his revolver, saying quietly:

"Hands up!"

Fraser started convulsively, and looked up with abject terror in his eyes. The necklace fell clattering to the floor, and one of the stones, catching a ray from the candle, sent up a shoot of fire.

"You!" Fraser cried. "You!"

He was shaking with fear, and his teeth clicked together so that he could scarcely speak. His voice came in a faint scream, as if he were being smothered.

"You're a detective," he cried, when Johns said nothing. "I wondered if you were."

"That's right," Johns answered imperturbably. "I'm a detective, and I guess I'm home on this trip."

Fraser did not speak for a minute; he was fighting to regain control of himself. Presently he said in a more natural voice:

"I'm in your hands. What are you going to do?"

"Stand back a pace while I pick up the necklace."

Fraser retreated a yard. A crafty light came into his eyes as the possibility of escape occurred to

him. Without looking ahead, he thought that, if he could disarm Johns, he might somehow save himself.

As Johns stooped down to get the necklace Fraser sprang forward and aimed a blow at his head. But Johns was too quick for him; he dodged, and the blow glanced harmlessly aside. With surprising agility he flung himself upon Fraser, sending his left hand crashing into his jaw. Fraser staggered backward, and before he could recover himself Johns had pocketed the necklace and stood covering him with his revolver.

"Don't try that on," he said roughly; "I could choke one of you in each hand, you blamed, ancestral, weasely Scotchman!"

Fraser looked at him as if he meant to spring. Then, realizing the completeness of his defeat and the inevitable disgrace which would come upon him, he hid his face in his hands and burst into sobs. It was a horrible sight, but Luke Johns had seen too many dreadful things to be easily moved. He sat down on the edge of a box and watched Fraser with a half-contemptuous smile on his lips.

"Come," he said presently, "you ain't dead yet, you know. While there's life there's hope."

"Hope!" Fraser groaned. "What have I to do with hope? I'm broken, finished. I wish to God you'd shot me. Then I should be clear of it all."

Johns' smile broadened as he answered:

"You're taking a black view. If I'd put a bul-

let into you maybe you'd be wishing you were alive again."

Silence fell. Fraser gradually regained control of himself; and presently, as a man does when he knows the worst and resolves to face it, he drew himself up and squared his shoulders.

"What are you going to do?" he asked in a low voice. "You had better rouse the house and send for the police. Let's get it over."

Johns eyed him narrowly. He disliked him, and he was glad to have him in his power; he was glad, too, to have recovered the necklace and earned the reward. But he knew a man when he saw one, and he appreciated Fraser's "grit" in forcing himself to meet his troubles calmly.

"I don't fancy that," he said, after a pause. "We don't want any village policeman shoving in here. Come to that," he added reflectively, "Vawdrey won't be pleased at making a scandal. These things are best kept quiet."

A flicker of hope dawned in Fraser's eyes.

"Do you mean," he asked, "you're going to let me off? You've got the necklace."

"Can't say that. It isn't up to me, any more'n it's up to me to raise a din in Vawdrey's house by sending for the police."

"What d'you mean, then?"

Johns sucked his teeth in contemplation. He had got the necklace—that was what he was to be paid for, and, having got it, he did not care a curse what happened to Fraser. Long experience of

delicate cases had taught him that, when the main object was achieved, it generally suited all parties not to press further, and he was disinclined to do anything on his own responsibility which might embarrass Vawdrey.

"See here," he said presently, "you're going to-morrow. Well, you can. If you're wanted, you won't find it easy to keep out. Go to London and stop there. Guess I'd take your word to be on hand when you're called."

"I see," Fraser answered slowly. "You won't arrest me till I've left here?"

"That's so. You don't want to say good-by in handcuffs."

"Very well. I shall do as you wish; I've got to. I will go to London and stay at my rooms till I hear from you."

He turned to pick up the candle, with the intention of going downstairs. But Luke Johns seemed in no hurry and remained seated. He was naturally curious, and now that his work was done, and the necklace in his pocket, he was inclined to indulge his curiosity.

"Say," he said in an easy tone, "this job was cleverly put through. Have you been in the trade before?"

Fraser's eyes fell and the color rushed into his face as he answered:

"No."

"Then you're a darned good performer. Some-

thing gave you the office—eh? That business with the clocks, I surmise."

Fraser looked at Johns. There was something persuasive, almost friendly, in the man's tone, which prompted him to tell the whole story.

"I suppose that began it," he said.

Then, with the thought that, if he could not justify his action, he could at least show an extenuating motive, he yielded himself more unreservedly, and added in a quick, tense voice:

"I was worried to death for a sum of money which had to be found; and seeing her wearing the necklace the devil himself made me think of taking it. It obsessed me; I couldn't get away from it. And, on top of that, some one suggested hiding it as a joke, and the whole plan rolled out before me. I tried to forget it and I couldn't; and when we were in her room before dinner, pretending to look for the necklace, I slipped back the bolt of the door. Even then I didn't mean to take it; I swear I didn't; and if I'd had a chance I'd have gone back and bolted the door again."

"And when you went to bed it kind o' gripped you?"

"Yes. I tried to go to sleep, but the thing danced before my eyes, and I think I went mad. I got up at last and came up here."

"And then?"

"I knew there was a coil of rope which used to hang on a peg in the passage; it was kept there so that the servants could scramble down in case of

fire. When I lived here as a boy I used it scores of times—I suppose that's what gave me the idea of getting into Pfeiffer's room. I came up to look for it, and I think I was glad to find it gone, because it settled the matter. But I came in here, and I found a lot of ropes which had come off these boxes."

"And that fixed you?"

"It was so infernally easy," Fraser cried piteously, "I couldn't resist. There didn't seem to be a risk in it."

"There wasn't. You must have smiled some when McVitie went snuffing off on the wrong tack."

"I don't know what he discovered. I never heard."

"He's after Pfeiffer. He couldn't see how any one else got in."

"Good heavens! Of course, Pfeiffer had nothing to do with it."

"We tumbled to that in about two seconds. We were sent here to see if it had ever been stolen at all. The lady was our mystery."

"Then it was you who went through her letters?"

"That's so," Johns answered, with a chuckle. "And a more blithering lot of writing I never saw. Diary—Monday: 'Arthur took my hand in the garden. I let him. He is a dear boy.' Tuesday: 'Arthur was very sweet.' Wednesday: 'Arthur was a dear boy again.' Gosh! It made me sick!"

Fraser did not respond to Luke Johns' pleas-

antry, but turned the conversation abruptly, saying:

"How did you find out?"

"Just luck and then reasoning. My wife's a terror at reasoning. I found the rope and the marks on the window-post, and we reckoned it out that whoever'd taken it wouldn't keep it on him. Chances were he'd put it somewhere till it was time to start—and that's to-morrow. So we watched to see him fetch it."

"Did you suspect me?"

"Well, counting everything, we narrowed it down to you and Benyon and Drury."

There was a pause. Then Luke Johns said:

"Say, why did you do it? You weren't giving all that to a girl?"

Fraser's lips quivered with pain.

"No; not to a girl," he said softly. "I had to find some money."

"That's the same thing, mostly."

Fraser hesitated. He wanted to justify himself, and at last he said:

"It was my mother. She had lost a lot at cards and had got into a money-lender's hands. He was threatening her, and I promised to find five thousand pounds by the end of September."

Luke Johns was touched. He had had to do with so many criminals, and he had never before met with an unselfish one.

"Well, that's a noble motive," he said. "Guess I almost wish I hadn't spotted you."

Fraser turned to him impetuously, crying:

"That's the truth. I did it to save her, so give me a chance. You've got the necklace. Let tonight be between you and me. You can easily make up a story, and I'll pay your fee and do anything you want to make it square."

"I couldn't do that," Johns answered, recovering from his momentary lapse into sentimentality. "My clients'll want to know; but I reckon they won't want to make a fuss."

"Must you tell them?"

"Yes."

"Then at least persuade them not to prosecute. They'll listen to you—you've got the necklace back for them."

"Well, I'll do what I can," Luke Johns drawled. "You haven't been overpolite to me, but I won't get back on you for that."

Fraser was trembling with excitement and fear.

"Plead with them, beg them, to do nothing," he cried. "Perhaps you can't realize what it means to me—the disgrace on the family. It would kill my mother."

"All right, I'll try. You go to London, and I'll pass you word soon as I get it. Now, I reckon we might turn in if you're ready."

Johns stood back and allowed Fraser to go in front of him with the candle. They went silently downstairs and along the lower corridor. They parted at Fraser's room, and Johns moved on to his own room.

His wife was waiting for him. He pressed the button of his electric torch, and she came toward him with eyebrows uplifted in an eager question. He said nothing, but drew the necklace from his pocket and turned the light upon it. Unemotional as she was by nature and training she put her hand to her breast and gasped.

She took it from him and held it up, turning it this way and that to catch the light. It was like a live thing, shifting and sparkling in her fingers. For some minutes she could not let it go; it absorbed her, and as she watched it flash, little breaths of laughter came from her lips.

At length she gave it back to her husband. Their eyes met, and in hers Luke Johns saw something which he had never seen there before—the lust of covetousness.

BOOK V

WHAT NO ONE DISCOVERED

CHAPTER I

LUKE JOHNS slept the sleep of the just man who has earned his reward. With the necklace under his pillow he curled himself up; and so he lay, untroubled by dreams or by the cares of other people.

His wife was more restless; in fact, she did not sleep at all. As with Fraser, the diamonds danced before her eyes, flashing out of the darkness and seducing her with their promise of wealth. Presently, by an extension of thought, she saw mirrored before her all that they might mean—the freedom from the struggle to live, the abandonment of the stuffy New York flat, the little house "down South" of which she and her husband often talked as a distant possibility. She was tired of work, and she craved for a home where she could be at peace, and forget that there were such things in the world as divorces and blackmail and robberies.

Hour after hour she lay beside her sleeping husband, asking herself again and again: "Can we get away with it?" Abstract morality had never troubled her much, and she was too well accustomed to mix with people who had none to value it highly. Some people were honest and some were not; and she had never found anything to show that the dishonest ones had the worst of it. It was the stupid

who went to the wall—the fools, who made mistakes, who "got into trouble."

Thus, no qualms of conscience distracted her thoughts from the craving to keep Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's necklace; and, though it was the first time she had been tempted by the magnitude of the prize to betray a client, no hesitation existed in her mind about doing it. The question which vexed her was how it could be done without bringing unpleasant consequences in its train. Naturally, they would keep the necklace until they reached London, and from there they might make a dash for the Continent and disappear. But she saw the futility of this as soon as it suggested itself. True, they were not known; but with such plunder the whole police force of Europe would be turned upon their track, and money spent like water to get in touch with them. That was "stupid," a fool's game, the sort of thing that made her contemptuous when other people did it.

No, it would have to be something cleverer than that if it were to be done at all. What they wanted was to create the belief that some one else had the necklace. Who? And how? Those were the questions which exercised her all through the night and remained unanswered in the morning. Finally she decided that they must wait upon events, and that no plan was possible at the moment. Things happened—she knew that as well as any one; and a lucky turn of the wheel might present the opening for which she had searched in vain. Mean-

while, no one knew that they had the necklace, except, of course, Fraser; and he could be trusted not to speak. She would warn Johns to say no more than was necessary to Vawdrey, and to let him think that they had not yet recovered it. With this decision, she looked at her watch, and seeing that it was now past seven she roused her husband and bade him fetch the slate.

"So it was Fraser," she wrote. "Tell me what happened."

Luke Johns, rather sleepy but in the best of tempers, sat up in bed and began to write:

"It was in the garret, under some straw in a packing-case. I might have found it myself if I'd thought to look. I caught him with his hand on it and scared him some. Seemed to me we didn't want a scene here, so I took it from him and told him to go to London and wait orders there. Reckon they won't prosecute, now they've got the swag."

"So he'll leave to-day?"

"Yes; along with us and the others. He said he'd been itching to get it and fighting it off; and then those clocks started him in fairly. He used to monkey up and down ropes here when he was a boy, and knew all about it from A to Z. Next day some of 'em put a laugh on Mrs. Dayrell-Wing and hid the necklace, and it just swept him off his feet. Says he never meant to do it, but all the same he unbolted the door when they were in

the room making believe to look for the necklace. And after that it was as easy as eating pie."

"Short of money, I suppose?"

"Wanted it for his mother. She was up a tree, with a few yapping underneath. I'm real sorry for him; I am so."

Mrs. Luke Johns was not so easily moved to pity as her husband, and she paid little heed to the extenuating circumstances of Fraser's case. She was much more interested in her own affairs, for Johns had his prejudices, and she was not sure what amount of persuasion would be necessary to bring him into line with her wishes. While she was considering how to broach the subject to him he wrote:

"Said I'd get him off if I could."

Mrs. Johns took the pencil from him with quick decision and answered:

"We've enough to do with ourselves. Don't worry about him."

Johns raised his eyebrows and grunted.

"Guess we're through," he wrote. "It's two weeks in Paris and then home."

"We're *not* through."

"Why?"

"Are you seeing Vawdrey?"

"Of course."

"Then don't tell him you've got the necklace. Let him think it's in London, and we're getting it there. If it comes out after, it's easy to say it was safer for no one to know you had it on you."

"What's the game?"

Mrs. Luke Johns hesitated for a long minute. Then she wrote: "The necklace would be more use to us than three thousand dollars."

Johns looked at her sharply. He understood; but the thing was beyond possibility.

"You're mad," he wrote. "If we walked away the first Marconigram would hold us up."

"It won't happen like that."

"Explain."

"I can't. I don't see clear yet. Likely it won't come out right, but anyway keep the necklace as long as you can."

"This is just fool talk. It's mesmerized you, looking at it."

"Never you mind. You do as I tell you. I'll boss this trip, and if we don't make anything, we don't lose anything."

Johns shook his head obstinately.

"See here," he wrote, "if we go on the cross, we're finished."

"We sha'n't go on the cross unless the road's open. I'm not a flat any more than you are. Do as I tell you."

"I don't fancy it."

"You make me tired. Have I ever let you down?"

"No; but breaking into the Treasury vaults is easier than this."

"Never you mind. Do as I tell you. Let Vaw-

drey think the necklace is in London, and we'll see what happens when we get there."

She put the slate aside without giving him an opportunity to reply. Luke Johns got out of bed and began to dress.

In the middle of shaving he laid down his razor and came back to her room. He took up the slate and wrote: "I can't see it. I've got to meet Porton to-morrow, and suppose I do fend off inquiry for a time, it leads nowhere and looks queer."

Mrs. Luke Johns dealt patiently with him. She answered: "Just so. You're worrying yourself about something which likely won't happen. I tell you, I've got no plan—only an idea. All I say is, keep the necklace so long as you don't have to risk anything."

"Give me a pointer how you're steering. I can't see."

Mrs. Luke Johns sucked the pencil and considered how she could put her nebulous idea into an intelligible form. It was so nebulous that in words it looked foolish, and yet she felt that there might be some good in it, if it could be developed.

"If," she wrote, "we made them believe we hadn't got it——"

Luke Johns blew out his cheeks and then laughed.

"You've got quit," he answered. "But seems to me this idea's just a pastime."

"Think it over. At worst, you can deliver up

the necklace to-morrow or next day and take a check."

He was turning to go back to his dressing-room when she laid her hand on his arm. She took the slate again and wrote:

"Would you do it, if the way was clear?"

He hesitated. He had done scores of dishonest and mean things in the interest of clients, but he had never yet been dishonest to benefit himself. He did not like the suggestion, less perhaps from any reason of morality than because he knew the pitfalls which lay in the path of the transgressor.

He began to walk up and down the room. His wife watched him shrewdly and noted his indecision. Presently she rose quietly from her seat and went to the bed. Slipping her hand under the pillow she drew out the necklace and spread it on the sheet. It lay there, quivering in the sunlight, a thin line of stones, yet uncannily alive and serpent-like. Johns came and stood beside her, looking down at it with kindling eyes.

"Yes, by gum!" he said. "If there's a safe way."

The favorite drama of Adam and Eve had been staged once more.

Breakfast that morning was earlier than usual and was a hurried meal. Fraser did not appear. Luke Johns, who fully appreciated the Gains *chef,* was the first to begin and the last to finish, working his way steadily through the line of silver dishes on the sideboard, and ending with cold

grouse pie. It would be a long time, he guessed, before he tasted the equal to that pie, and he took a second helping. But when Vawdrey rose he abandoned the last elusive drops of gravy and followed him out of the room.

"I'd like a word," he said, touching Vawdrey on the arm.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"In your library."

"Come along. But we haven't got many minutes; the car is due."

Luke Johns went with him into the study and shut the door.

"About the necklace," he said. "We know who's got it."

"Eh?" Vawdrey exclaimed. "You've discovered something?"

"Yes. Fraser took it."

"Good God! But when I spoke to you yesterday morning you hadn't found out anything. Are you sure?"

"Positive. And I'll tell you how he fixed it. He knew Pfeiffer slept like a boa constrictor, and he slid down a rope from the garret window and walked in. He'd unbolted the door into Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room the night before. There wasn't any risk about it; you might have done it yourself if you'd thought of it first."

"Then what is happening? Does he admit it? Have you confronted him?"

"Yes, he climbs down right enough. And he's

going through to London to wait orders. I reckoned you didn't want a flare up here, and it'll all be done quietly."

"Thanks, yes. I appreciate your tact," Vawdrey said thoughtfully. "So McVitie was wrong in saying that no one entered Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room. He didn't hit on the idea of a man lowering himself down from above. How did you?"

"Well, I guessed it. I'm used to guessing, and when you're used to it you sometimes guess right. It came to me when I was walking over the grass with you yesterday."

"I remember; you asked me who slept upstairs. I didn't see your point."

"No? Well, all at once it struck me this house kind o' lends itself to trapeze business. One window over another, and the door in the middle, like the picture on a box of bricks. Guess the man was short of notions when he built it."

Vawdrey laughed, saying: "They liked a symmetrical design in the eighteenth century. Many of us like it still." Then, relapsing into gravity, he went on: "I suppose there's no possibility of doubt about this. You have recovered the necklace?"

"I *shall* recover it," Johns answered.

"You know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Where? If Fraser took it, it would be in the house."

"No. In London."

"Then he sent it away—by post, I suppose?"

"Says so. I'm not fretting; I've got him round the neck."

"Then I may take it for certain that the robbery will be satisfactorily cleared up, and that no suspicion will attach to Mr. Pfeiffer? I have a particular reason for asking."

"You may take it for certain, Mr. Vawdrey. I don't say Fraser's going to jail; likely enough it'll be hushed up."

"For every one's sake I hope it will be. I only want to be assured that there's not going to be any doubt about Mr. Pfeiffer."

"That's sure. There'll be no loose ends."

"Well, I'm greatly relieved. I'm sorry for Fraser, very sorry indeed. Sudden temptation, I suppose."

"Just so. Couldn't stand seeing a hundred thousand dollars flash on a woman's neck; he's not the first."

Gibson came in to announce that the motor was ready.

"By the way," Vawdrey said, as he moved to the door, "am I to know about this? It's very awkward."

"Know nothing. Shake Fraser by the hand as if you wanted to see him again to-morrow."

"I'll try."

CHAPTER II

THE Vawdreys stood at the door to see their guests depart, and when the motors had disappeared round the bend of the drive they turned back into the house.

"Only half-past nine," Mrs. Vawdrey said, glancing at the clock. "I shall have a nice, long morning to write letters before the others come. Ethel dear, are you going for a ride?"

"No, mother; I shall stay in the garden."

Her voice was lifeless and despondent, for, now that they were alone, she could not make an effort to appear in good spirits. The accusation against Pfeiffer was more than she could bear. She believed him to be innocent; but, as day after day went by, the weight of facts against him seemed by the mere lapse of time to grow heavier. "I won't believe it of him," she said to herself again and again, and each repetition was more vehement than the last, because the pressure against her faith was greater.

Vawdrey saw how near to breaking down she was. He slipped his arm into hers, saying:

"Come along, Ethel girlie, come and talk to me."

"Yes, father," she answered submissively.

"Come into the study and watch me smoke a cigar. It tastes twice as good when you're there."

"But it's such a nice morning. Why not the garden?"

"No; let's sit in the study. I've got something to tell you—something you may like to hear, perhaps."

"Not about——?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, about——" he answered, smiling.

A light flashed into her eyes, and she put her hands impulsively on his shoulders as she cried:

"Oh, father! Best and dearest, have you found out something? Tell me quickly."

"Mayn't I light my cigar first?"

"Well, make haste. Come along. You're not—you're not going to be disappointing? I can't bear chaff just now."

Vawdrey's eyes softened as he looked at her. She was very dear to him, and he would not have thwarted her even if Pfeiffer had been a much less eligible son-in-law than he was.

"No; bar chaff," he said. "I've got a bit of news for you. Come and nestle down beside me and I'll tell you."

She sat down on the arm of his chair and put her hand in his, saying:

"Well?"

The cigar would not draw, and Vawdrey was provokingly slow over a second match. At last he said:

"Do you know, that little American bounder has solved the mystery?"

"Do you mean Mr. Johns? What has he to do with it?"

"He was a detective."

"No! Was he? Oh, father, did you really bring him in because the Scotch person muddled it so? How splendid and enterprising of you!"

"*I* didn't bring him in—my conscience is clear of that. But I let him come, which was almost as bad; and ever since, I've fervently wished I hadn't. Still, as he has pulled it off, I suppose it's all right now."

"Tell me," she cried.

"How he did it, goodness only knows. But he says the man has confessed, and he's going to get the necklace in London."

"But who was it?"

"Well, I suppose you've guessed it wasn't the stainless Willie."

"I knew that all along," she boasted, laughing.

"And how do you think it was done?"

"But I want to know who it was first. Was it one of the servants?"

"No. It was Fraser."

"Oh! How perfectly hateful! What could have induced him to do such a thing?"

"Ah, my dear, the usual reason, which you and I don't realize the force of—want of money."

"I liked him rather," Ethel said slowly. "He seemed so depressed, as if he'd had a bad time."

"I suppose he had. There was a screw loose somewhere."

"How was it found out?"

"I don't really know. Johns didn't say much; we only had a minute together, just before he left. But it appears that Fraser let himself down from the window above Willie's, went through into Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room, bagged the necklace, and climbed up again. It looks simple enough; in fact, Johns was kind enough to say that I might have done it myself if I'd thought of it first."

"That accounts for there being no trace of a ladder."

"Yes. Our worthy Scotchman didn't think of that. He'll be a little bit vexed when he hears."

"That's a good thing. He was perfectly odious. Poor little Johns and his wife were a thousand times nicer; really, he was rather a dear."

"I daresay he wasn't so bad, only I was so sick at having him here. You know it was he who ransacked Mrs. Dayrell-Wing's room and read all her letters."

"Was it? How funny!"

"Awfully funny! It worried me nearly out of my senses."

There was a pause. Ethel sat playing with the jade ball which hung from a long chain round her neck. She was dreaming, and the dream was evidently pleasant, for a soft, happy glow brightened her gray eyes. Presently she turned to her father, and nestling closer to him said:

"Dada, what shall we do?"

She rarely used the old pet name.

"Go for a walk, I should think," he laughed back at her.

"Stupid dada! I mean about—Willie."

"Oh, about Willie? Well, suppose we wait till we get back to town?"

"I shall do nothing of the sort. I meant—shall we telegraph?"

"I shouldn't do that. It would be so bad for the postmistress."

"Then write. He could get here to-morrow evening."

Vawdrey stroked her hand gently.

"Quite sure, little girl? Certain you know what you want?"

"Quite. Absolutely quite."

"Well, I suppose you must sail your own boat in your own way; and, if you know your own mind, I'm not going to interfere. Run away and write your letter, dear, and I'll write too. I've got to apologize."

"Dearest!"

"No, little girl, only second dearest now," he answered, drawing her closer and kissing her.

When Ethel had left him he went in search of his wife, whom he found in the drawing-room dealing with some heavy arrears of family correspondence.

"How much has Ethel told you?" he asked.

"What about?"

"About Willie."

"Why, nothing. Is there——?"

"He came to me a week ago and asked my consent."

"But why didn't you tell me? Ethel hasn't said a word. Is that why he left so suddenly?"

"I didn't tell you because I was worried to death about it."

"I don't see. If she likes him— You always said you weren't ambitious about her marrying, and I feel the same."

"That's all right; but his proposal came at an awkward moment. Emily, I've been keeping you in the dark, because it didn't seem any good upsetting you; but I've been having a stormy time."

"What's the matter? I do wish you'd tell me things, Tom. You know you always have to in the end."

"Well, this wretched woman's beastly necklace —that's been the trouble. That Scotch owl came here and sifted things out; and, when Willie interviewed me about Ethel, he'd just told me that Willie was the only possible person who could have taken it."

"Good gracious! And had he?"

"It looked awfully like it, and I bundled him off hotfoot. Of course, he told Ethel, and I had a job to prevent her from doing something silly; but at last I persuaded her to look on and see what happened. I've been simply praying that they'd get evidence enough to arrest him."

"What an extraordinary story. I *should* like to know why I wasn't told," poor Mrs. Vawdrey ex-

claimed with rising indignation. "It's too ridiculous to treat me as if I were a child in the nursery."

"Well, dear, I acted for the best. And, besides, I thought Ethel would confide in you."

"She has never said a syllable. You know how fond she is of being secretive. Of course, I knew she liked Willie, and he was always very pleasant. But now— It's really dreadful."

"Stop a bit. You haven't had half the story yet."

"Then pray go on. I shall have to postpone my letter to Maria."

"You'll have something to tell her after this. Well, to continue. As if McVitie wasn't enough, we had another detective thrust upon us—Mr. Luke Johns."

Mrs. Vawdrey bounced in her chair.

"A detective! I wondered why you asked that common little American and his wife to stay. I might have known there was something behind it."

"Perhaps you might. It was the silliest thing I ever did, I believe; but it turned out right. He's unravelled the whole story and caught the thief and carried him off to London."

"Who was it? No one in the house, I'm sure, unless it was Tipton."

"Fraser."

"Mercy upon us!" Mrs. Vawdrey cried in much agitation. "He stole the necklace? You can't be serious."

"I am. And that's the end of the story, as far as we're concerned."

"Oh, Tom! To think of it! How dreadful!"

"Don't let's think of it; there's something else to think of now. I've told Ethel, and she's upstairs writing half a ream to Willie, to bring him back by the next train."

"You've upset me so I can't think of anything," poor, stout Mrs. Vawdrey cried. "Ring for Gibson. I must have my salts."

"I don't know what to do," she murmured, when the salts had been brought. "You and Ethel between you are always carrying me off my feet. You bought Gains in such a hurry that I didn't even know whether there was a cupboard to put a blanket in. You're so impetuous, Tom."

"Life's too short to argue everything out."

"And this engagement—I can't decide all in a moment. I like Willie, he's always so pleasant; but as a husband for Ethel——"

"Why, you said a moment ago that you didn't see any objection if she liked him."

"Well, if I did, I don't want to be driven into it without an instant to look round."

"Hadn't you better talk it over with the child. She'll tell you much more than I can."

"Of course I must talk it over. I'll go to her at once."

Left to himself, Vawdrey went into his study and sat down to write to Pfeiffer; for he knew his wife too well to doubt her consent to the engage-

ment as soon as she was satisfied that Ethel wanted to marry him. He lighted another cigar and began:

"My dear Willie:

"I owe you a very sincere apology for what I said when we met last. Circumstances, of which you will learn later, put us at cross purposes; and, in expressing my real and deep regret, I can only hope that when you know the whole story you will acquit me of evil.

"Ethel is writing to you, asking you to run up here for a few more days' shooting. Please come. *I* never refuse her anything, and I hope you will follow the same rule—now and in the future.

"Yours sincerely,
"T. Vawdrey."

Apparently, Ethel had little difficulty in satisfying her mother that Willie Pfeiffer was beyond criticism; for, soon after Vawdrey had finished his letter they came into the study together.

"Then has the child got her way once more?" Vawdrey said.

"Oh, Tom, it's—it's very upsetting. But she seems so sure of herself, and Willie *is* very nice. I've always said so."

"But you've never thought of him as a son-in-law? Now, that's odd."

Ethel put her arms round his shoulders, saying: "You're not to tease mums. She's been perfectly angelic."

"And what about me? Haven't I been angelic, too?"

"Of course, you both are—dear things!"

"This," Vawdrey said, "is getting too much like the last act of a melodrama. Bless you, my children, and totter off. That's what I've said to Willie," he added, handing his letter to his wife.

She read it and passed it on to Ethel.

"Thank you, father," Ethel said. "Now I'm going straight off to the post."

Vawdrey and his wife watched her out of the room.

"We *shall* miss her," he said wistfully.

Mrs. Vawdrey sniffed, and found that she had mislaid her handkerchief.

CHAPTER III

FROM Edinburgh Luke Johns sent a telegram to Porton:

"Leslie Fraser arrives London to-night 10.45. Business almost through. I will call to-morrow morning. JOHNS."

By a natural adjustment, the other members of the party had taken a carriage between them, leaving the Luke Johns to find seats in the next compartment; and save in the dining-car, and for a hurried moment on arrival at King's Cross, Fraser was free from the burden of their presence. They were as well pleased as he was at this, for they had a problem to think out—the most delicate and the most important which had ever occupied their acute minds. Although they were alone for a good part of the journey they scarcely exchanged a word. Mrs. Luke Johns sat with her hands in her lap, looking out of the window with eyes which saw nothing except the flash of a thin line of stones. Her husband intermittently read a newspaper and picked his teeth.

The next morning they woke early, for after the keen air of Scotland the boarding-house in Bloomsbury was intolerably hot and stuffy. Johns got out of bed and fetched the slate, and they began the discussion which both of them had been putting

off in the hope of finding a definite plan to propound.

"Anything?" Johns wrote.

"Nothing much."

"I've got to see Porton this morning."

Mrs. Luke Johns nodded.

"And give him the necklace."

"Don't do it. Remember what I said. Keep it as long as you can."

"But he's got to have it. There's no way out, far as I see. If he doesn't have it to-day, what yarn can I tell him? And later, when he gets it, he'll want to know why I've been keeping it. There's no sense in taking risks for nothing."

Mrs. Johns' forehead was puckered with the stress of thinking. She took the pencil and held it suspended for a moment. Then she put it down, straining her hands across her eyes. Johns waited.

Presently she began to write slowly, as if considering the exact value of each word.

"Put it this way: Tell him what we've done and that you've brought Fraser up; but don't say you found him in the attic. Cover that up, and let him think we managed some other way. Say the necklace is in London, and that Fraser will hand it over, but wants to know first whether they will prosecute. Don't make it out a condition, but suggest that if they prosecute it won't be so easy to get. Go on and say there's some one else in the business. Say Fraser told you the necklace is in a safe place."

She stopped, and Johns, after considering what she had written, answered:

"You're not looking all round this story. There's a big lot of risks in it. Suppose he sees Fraser, and it comes out we've had it all along, I'd sing pretty small. And, anyway, it only gives us a few more hours. If he doesn't have it to-day he's got to have it to-morrow, and it'll queer us properly if he starts asking questions."

"No, it won't. If they get the necklace they'll swallow most everything you say. You can slip out by saying Fraser asked you to do the best for him, so you put it that way trying to get him off. You're real sorry for him—see?"

"I don't fancy it. It's too much of a tight-rope excursion. Likely enough we'll lose the reward and the necklace too."

"Not if you're smart. You can do it."

"Where's it leading?"

"I don't know. I don't see the way clear a step farther. But I've got a feeling that necklace is ours if we've got grit enough, and we'll go on keeping it till we have to pass it on. Things happen; and when it's all dark some flat turns the gas on for you."

Johns made a gesture of protest.

"I'm as keen as you are," he wrote, "but this isn't the road home. If I'd had sense I'd have searched the attic and found the necklace myself when I first went up there; and then we could have

hopped it easy enough. But Fraser's going to blab if we trick him—you may bet on that."

"Not if we can get the right kind of pull on him."

"And how can you?"

"I don't know yet."

Johns stroked his cheek reflectively as he bent his mind to this possibility. He thought he had never met one less promising.

"Well," he wrote at last, "I'll go on, as you say so. And I'll reel this yarn off to Porton and see what he says."

"When you've seen him come right back here. I'll wait. And keep him off going direct to Fraser; have the deal left in your hands. That's urgent."

Johns, with a gloomy face, slid off the bed and began to dress.

Soon after eleven o'clock he was shown into Mr. Porton's room at the office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The hot, dusty atmosphere, the tin boxes and bundles of papers, and the secluded quietness of the big room, combined with the inflexible lines of Porton's legal face to send his spirits down with a run. He seemed to himself to be made of glass—a figure to be seen through and then broken in pieces. He felt the perspiration breaking out all over his body, and he furtively wiped a damp hand on his trousers.

"Good morning, Mr. Johns," Porton said, rising from his chair. "I got your very satisfactory tele-

gram, and I hope I may now congratulate you on completing an excellent piece of work—may I?"

"Thanks. We're in train."

"But I didn't understand your mention of Fraser. Was it the lady, as we thought?"

"No. Fraser's our man."

"Nonsense! You astonish me. The Frasers are a very old and well-connected family. I couldn't have thought it possible. Dear, dear! Very sad."

"It's often the cleanest one of the crowd that does the dirtiest jobs."

Luke Johns was beginning to recover his nerve, and when Porton asked him how he came to suspect Fraser he answered with more ease.

"Can't say we did suspect him. We settled the lady wasn't in it, and that stranded us; there didn't seem any more for us to do. All the same, we didn't believe the Pfeiffer story, so we kept on looking round."

"And then?"

"Well, the point was how anybody got into the room. He didn't come down the chimney or through the door, and the Scotch detective swore there were no footmarks under the window, though the gravel was soft enough to show where the bugs had walked."

"He'd raked it over?"

"No, and he hadn't come by aeroplane either. Guess he would have in a Sunday Supplement story, but this plot wasn't made to sell at ten cents."

"How *did* he get in, then?"

"It fair puzzled me, but I struck it right at last. And when I went to look, it was plain as daylight, rope and all. He'd taken a tip from the angels and come from above."

"By Jove! How did you find it out?"

"Just—guessing."

"But even then you didn't know who it was."

"We guessed again. I had a talk with Fraser, and he folded up as easy as a parlor bed."

"Good. Very good indeed. When was that?"

"Yesterday morning."

"And the necklace? Have you got it?"

Johns had it in his pocket, in case it should be wanted. One never knew what turn a conversation might take. Now, half-unconsciously, he felt for it; but he answered without the quiver of an eyelid:

"It's close handy."

"Where is it? Didn't he hand it over?"

"Well, it's this way. He's parted with it."

Porton was startled and said energetically: "Good Lord! Then some one was in with him? We may miss it yet. Has he confessed who?"

"I don't know who's in with him. He told me he'd parted with it, but he reckons he can lay his hand on it right enough. I'm going to get it to-day."

"Well, for goodness' sake do so. Don't delay an instant."

Johns took a deep breath.

"I've fixed to get it," he answered, "but he asked me to see you first. He'd like to know whether you're going to prosecute."

Porton shot a keen glance at Johns.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he said. "If we prosecute, we can whistle for the necklace. Young blackguard! I'd like to get him seven years."

Johns said nothing. Porton fumed and tapped the desk angrily with his pencil.

"Why did you let him out of your sight?" he asked in a sharp tone. "Why didn't you wire me to have him shadowed when he arrived last night?"

"I did wire. I supposed you *would* shadow him. I gave you the office as plain's I could in a telegram."

"It conveyed nothing of the kind to me. You said, 'Business almost through.' "

"So it is. You're worrying about nothing. Come to that, what's the use of shadowing him? He said the necklace was in London in a safe place. 'Tisn't likely he'd lay the scent for us right up to the door."

Johns was getting into deep water. He had made Porton angry—perhaps suspicious—and he was not sure that he would be able to explain away all he had said if he was obliged to surrender the necklace. He wished fervently that he had disregarded his wife's advice and had put the necklace on the table as soon as he entered the room. Even now it was not too late. He could whip it out and tell Porton he had been chaffing him. He slid his

hand again into his pocket. If Porton pressed his inquiries further he would own up.

But, when Porton spoke again, his annoyance seemed to have passed. He had abandoned useless regrets for the real business of recovering the necklace.

"Well, well," he said more easily, "what's done can't be helped, and I daresay, with your experience in handling scoundrels, you've taken the best course. The point now is, how far can we rely on Fraser? Can he get it back from whoever has it? And will he?"

"I'd say yes."

"You know, this is a damning light on his character—he's done this before. He's too wide-awake for a novice."

Johns did not answer. He was still feeling very uncomfortable.

"It's beyond doubt," Porton continued. "It looks to me as if he was one of a country-house gang. These robberies are always happening."

"Yes. It's a popular industry."

"We certainly ought to prosecute; but it seems to me he's got us in his hands."

"He didn't say he wouldn't bail up if you prosecuted."

"No; but he meant it. That kind of gentry doesn't dot every *i*. What do you think yourself? You saw him."

"I think," Johns answered slowly, "there'll be difficulties if he doesn't get his free pass."

"So do I. But, upon my soul, if my clients weren't so heavily interested I'd get a warrant out and chance it."

"Don't do it that way. Leave him to me. If you're going to prosecute, I'll do the best I can."

"It's too risky, it's too risky. We've *got* to recover the necklace. You'll have to tell him that we'll take no steps, provided it's in our possession by midday to-morrow."

"All right," Johns said, rising. "I think I'll bring it."

"I hope to heaven you will, for your sake as well as ours. There's a pretty big check waiting for you—pay for your holiday and leave a bit over—eh?"

"I can do with it."

"Well, then, you'll see Fraser at once. And if you have any news, come round or telephone. You can get me here all day."

"I've agreed to see him this afternoon," Johns said, wishing to gain as much time as possible.

"Oh. I suppose he's out now, fetching it. Confound it! I wish he'd been watched. However, twelve o'clock to-morrow—not a moment longer."

"That's right. You may count on me."

Luke Johns left Porton's office overweighted by the consciousness that he had started himself on a perilous adventure, which might lead him to a place far different from the little house down South. Already he was not sure how he had fared or whether a way of retreat was still open. One

thing only was certain and satisfactory—the necklace was still in his side-pocket. He put his hand on it, and the feel of it under the paper gave him courage.

His wife was watching for him at the boarding-house, and they went upstairs together. She was excited, but she did not betray it, and she waited quietly while he unlocked his suit-case and took out the slate.

"I've still got it," he wrote. "But if he'd said another word I'd have been bluffed into parting. I made out Fraser passed it before he was nabbed. He judged some one was in with him, and got riled because I hadn't wired to shadow him."

"Go on," Mrs. Luke Johns answered.

"I asked him about prosecuting, and he got madder than ever. Wanted to arrest Fraser right away and chance getting the necklace. I put him off that and he quieted down some, and agreed they wouldn't prosecute if the necklace was handed over by twelve to-morrow. I told him I had a meeting fixed with Fraser for after lunch."

"Is that all?"

"That's all. But we're in up to the knees, I reckon. I didn't say more than I had to, but it'll take a lot of explaining. I wish we weren't in this, I do fairly. Looks as if we couldn't miss getting nipped somewhere."

"If you only said what you've told me, you've done it well."

"I'm afraid."

"Why? Supposing it does come out, it'll puzzle them; but when they've got the necklace, they won't worry. What can Porton do to us?"

"Nothing, if we hand out and get the dollars."

"Then don't fret."

"Have you thought of anything fresh?" Luke Johns asked, after a pause.

Mrs. Luke Johns shook her head.

"There's no way," she wrote, with evident reluctance. "Seems as if we'll just have to take the money and be pleased with that."

"I thought so all along. Still, I'll kick myself having to part with it."

"Would you risk a bolt?"

"No. Not for a million," he answered emphatically.

"Then we'll have to play the game."

"That's so. I'll have to see Fraser this afternoon. Think I'll tell him to get abroad for a bit, in case he says anything."

Mrs. Johns got up and walked to the window. She stood looking out for two or three minutes, resting her chin on her hand. Then she turned and came back to where Johns was sitting. She took the pencil and wrote:

"Don't go to his rooms. See him somewhere outside."

Johns looked at her with narrowed eyes. She had got an idea, and renewed hope set his heart thumping.

"Why?" he wrote. "I thought you'd given up."

"I have—almost. But don't go to his rooms. Don't ask why, because I don't know. The feeling's in my bones you'd best not be seen there."

Johns' face fell. Even his clever wife had her illogical moments, he thought.

"But I said I'd go. He's waiting there for me to 'phone him."

"Well, 'phone him to meet you somewhere else," she cried, her temper giving way under the strain which she had been enduring. "You make me tired, Luke, with your bald-headed fool talk."

Johns, the patient husband, yielded to her. After all, it did not matter whether he went to Fraser's rooms or met him elsewhere, and his wife seemed set on it. She was about used up, that was the truth; and as soon as they had cashed Porton's check they would get over to Paris and put this thing behind them.

"All right," he said quietly, "I'll ring him up."

CHAPTER IV

THE high value which religion puts upon a contrite heart is not so arbitrary as it seems. For, while an expression of regret for a wrong discovered slips off the tongue no less easily than any other lie, the feeling which prompts it is usually no deeper than a desire to be rid of a mistake as cheaply as possible. The contrite heart is rare, much rarer than optimists would have us believe—so rare that it is specially singled out as an acceptable peace-offering.

Fraser was contrite; and therein let him find compassion before the tribunal of the Pharisees as well as before that of the Publicans. The journey from Scotland, following upon a sleepless night, was an ordeal savage enough to break the strongest spirit. His companions were in a gay mood—the gayer, perhaps, at ending a visit on which a shadow had been cast—and he was forced to bear his part in the laughter and foolish conversation. On the platform at King's Cross he sought out Luke Johns and begged him once more to do what was possible. Johns promised to telephone or call on him the next day, as soon as he had seen Porton.

The appearance of his rooms gave Fraser a strange feeling of a return to reality. They were so entirely familiar, so much a part of his life as he had lived it until he went to Gains that the fortnight which had elapsed since he left them seemed

to belong to a separate existence. It was like a nightmare which had harassed him until he awoke to find it gone.

That was for a moment. Then the crushing blow swung in upon him—his former life was the dream which was past; it was to horror and disgrace that he had awakened. Everything was gone—his name, his position, his easy, cynical contentment. Gone, blown to the winds by a temptation which he had not been strong enough to master.

Mechanically, he undressed and went to bed. For a long time he lay awake, and when sleep at last came it was torn by dreams. He lived over again the moment in the attic, and saw the iron glint of Johns' eyes as he covered him with his revolver. Then the scene changed, and out of the darkness sprang a vision of unholy light. A Thing, which moved sinuously toward him, flashing and coiling, coming close to him and breaking away, then advancing upon him again, nearer, nearer, nearer——

He awoke with a scream of terror and sprang up.

"What was it? What was it?" he cried in a dazed voice.

He was subject to fits of neuralgia, and when morning came he was racked by a blinding headache. He could eat nothing, and a cup of tea, like the cordials of the torture-chamber, served only to increase his capacity for suffering. He looked at

his watch. It was not much past eight, and he could not expect to see Johns before eleven.

Supposing they let him off, he thought. Even so, people would know about it. The Vawdreys would know, and Drury, and probably Mrs. Dayrell-Wing. And they would talk—did they ever fail to talk! He must leave England; he could not show his face in London, to risk a cut direct from one or another. Oh, he knew the cruelty of it—the averted eyes, the bolder stare which looked at you and through you, seeing nothing; the silence which fell as you entered the club smoking-room; the quiet retreat of men from the chairs near you. Had he not seen it? There was Haley, the poor devil who put his uncle's name on a bill. Nothing was done, but every one knew about it, and called him shameless because he tried to live it down. Live it down! He stood it for three months, and then shot himself in a squalid hotel in Paris.

He would not make Haley's mistake. He would go to America or Australia, and begin life afresh in a country where they do not ask you what you have done, but what you are going to do. Here at home the past was always round one's neck. For him, as Fraser of Gains, it had carried privileges: doors had been opened, and hands held out. For him, as a victim of a temptation, it carried a sentence of excommunication. No; he would not make Haley's mistake.

But supposing they decided to prosecute. The thought stabbed him like a knife. He put his hands

to his head and drew a deep, sobbing breath. It was not the hardships of the prison that dazed him, the loss of all the necessary trifles which made life civilized; that was bearable, a penance which might even bring with it a certain consolation. It was the public ordeal, the degradation in the eyes of his world, which drew a black curtain over the future, making it unrealizable.

He sprang up and paced the room, mad with pain and with the terrors which confronted him. If only Johns would come! A word from him would at least end the uncertainty. Even the worst was preferable to this awful suspense. It was past eleven now; surely he must have seen them by this time. Then why didn't he telephone? He promised to telephone.

He took off the receiver and called the exchange.

"Is my line in order?" he asked.

"Yes. Have you been ringing?" came the answer.

"No. But I was expecting a message and it hasn't come through. You're sure there hasn't been a call for me?"

"They'd have rung you if there'd been one."

He hung up the receiver and resumed his restless march from the window to the door and back again. To and fro he went, it seemed for the thousandth time, and, when he looked at his watch, only ten minutes had gone.

His man came in to clear away the breakfast.

"Will you be lunching out, sir?" he asked.

"Lunching out? Oh, I suppose so. Leave these things; I'll ring when I want you."

"Very good, sir."

Fraser called him back.

"No one's been here, have they?"

"No, sir."

"I'm expecting some one—a short, clean-shaved person. Show him up directly he comes."

"Yes, sir."

Fraser threw himself into an armchair. There was his mother; he must write and tell her she would not have the money he had promised. What a mess it was! Whatever induced her to lose such a lot of money at cards? It was always that, as long as he could remember anything; his father used to get so furious about it, and then she would give up playing for a time. But she never left off for long, and she always lost. What would happen to her? Probably not much; people thought nothing of bankruptcy nowadays. She had cried when she begged him to help her, and had talked of being ruined; but the ruin was his, not hers.

"What a fool I was!" he cried weakly. "What a fool I was!"

As the minutes went by he became more and more distracted. What had happened? Was Johns playing him false? He had promised to telephone or come, and it was past twelve. Had he lost his telephone number? But he saw him write it down, and, besides, it was in the book. What *could* be happening? Three or four times

he rang up the exchange, always to get the same answer—no one had called him. At the last attempt the girl had kept him waiting and he had sworn at her. Then, dreading lest she would not connect him when Johns called, he rang up again and apologized.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "I've got such a headache I don't know what I'm doing."

It was two o'clock when the bell rang. He snatched at the receiver and heard the girl say not unkindly:

"Double three one, here you are."

"Hullo!"

"Is that Mr. Fraser?" Johns' voice came over the wire.

"Yes. Is that Johns? I've been waiting hours."

"Sorry. I'm only just through."

"Tell me what's happened. Are they going to——"

"Mind what you say over the 'phone," Johns interrupted sharply. "Some one may be listening."

"But I can't wait. Tell me what they said."

"I want to see you. I can't talk now."

"Well, come along, then. Where are you?"

"Callbox in Oxford Street."

"Then jump into a taxi. You'll be here in five minutes."

"Can't manage that. I've got an appointment. You'd best meet me."

"Where?"

"Say Marble Arch. I'll be inside the railings at three o'clock."

"But it's only two now. Make it in ten minutes."

"Can't. Three o'clock's the earliest."

"You must. I won't wait another hour," Fraser shouted desperately.

But Johns had rung off, and Fraser was answered by the girl in the exchange.

At a few minutes before three Luke Johns came out of the Tube station at the Marble Arch and entered the Park. He glanced to right and left, and then walked slowly along the path which follows Park Lane. His face was grave, and his eyes lacked the alert brightness which was usually in them. He was depressed, for, as he told himself, the game was up: to-morrow he would have to surrender the necklace to Porton and pretend to be delighted with a reward of three thousand dollars. The appointment with Fraser did not claim a thought. He was bored with Fraser, and meant to get rid of him as quickly as possible. He had fixed Hyde Park as a meeting-place because he was tired, and a couple of hours under a tree might calm his mind and help him to accept the inevitable.

Presently he saw Fraser approaching; but at first he scarcely recognized him, so greatly had he changed from the neat, well-groomed young man who had made sarcastic remarks to him at Gains about his Scotch ancestry. He was wearing an old flannel suit and a Panama hat. His tie was disordered, and he was trailing his stick on the

ground as he slouched along. His shoulders were bent, his chest seemed to have fallen in, and he walked with the loose, stumbling movements of a man who has lost his hold on life.

Luke Johns looked at him attentively. He had seen many a trapped criminal, he had seen a man collapse on hearing his sentence, he had seen fear and hatred twist a man's face into the likeness of a fiend; but he could not recall so rapid and complete a transformation as Fraser had undergone.

"My God!" he said below his breath.

When Fraser came up Johns looked into his eyes. They were blurred and dim, like the eyes of an old man. His hand trembled upon his stick, and a convulsive working of the lips showed the effort he was making to control himself.

Luke Johns could be tender-hearted when he was in a good humor—in the attic at Gains, with a big fee just earned. Now, disappointed of something larger, he was as hard as stone. He looked at Fraser, coldly, dispassionately, without pity—as a doctor may look at an interesting, if slightly disgusting, specimen in a laboratory jar. As he looked the expression of his face changed. His eyes narrowed and the iron glint flashed into them; the line of his mouth straightened, and his chin took a more resolute curve. He had found the idea for which he and his wife had been searching.

He saw that Fraser was paralyzed with abject fear—the fear of disgrace, of trial and sentence,

of being "found out." Only once had he seen such an intense agony of fear in a man's face—in the Toulon scandal, when he told Graham Toulon that his secret was known and the proofs against him were complete.

And an hour later Graham Toulon had been found with his throat cut.

He knew it. He had only to tell Fraser that they were going to prosecute him. And then? Then there would be no evidence. No one except Fraser knew who had the necklace, and Porton would draw the natural inference—that he had passed it to an accomplice, and could not get it back when he asked for it. There would be no evidence—unless he left a letter. That was a chance against them; that was the one risk which they must run in a game for the biggest stake they had ever had on the table.

"Why don't you speak?" Fraser cried hoarsely, breaking in upon Johns' reflections. "What have you got to tell me?"

Johns recalled himself.

"Oh, how are you?" he said.

"What have you got to tell me? Are they going to prosecute?"

Johns turned a flinty eye upon him.

"That's so," he said.

For a moment Frazer reeled. His knees shook under him and he leant heavily upon his stick, putting his other hand to his forehead with a gesture

of utter weariness. Then he pulled himself together, and said in a quiet, restrained voice:

"Thanks. I don't think I need ask you anything further. I shall be at my rooms when I'm wanted."

He turned and walked slowly away. Johns watched him go. Not a muscle of his face moved, not a shadow of hesitation or regret crossed his eyes. For a full minute he stood still, thinking. Then he spat noisily, as if some flavor had displeased him, and blew his nose. Then, striking off across the grass, he looked about him for a shady seat.

CHAPTER V

LUKE JOHNS stayed in the Park till after five o'clock. He did not hurry his return to Gower Street, though he knew that his wife was expecting him, and something had been said about a visit to Madame Tussaud's. For the present he preferred to be alone; and he sauntered along Oxford Street, looking idly in the shop-windows, and enjoying the hot afternoon sunshine which beat upon his back. He found it exceedingly grateful, and the sight of the shadier by-streets made him feel chilly as he passed them.

He stopped at a shop where views of London and reproductions of pictures in the national collections were displayed. A photograph of Westminster Abbey caught his fancy and he went in and bought it. He and his wife had been there soon after they arrived in London, and it would be a pleasant memento of their trip.

He strolled as far as the Frascati Restaurant, where he ordered a cup of tea and a cigar. He sat watching the people round him, in particular a girl in a monstrous hat, whose appetite for French pastry seemed unlimited.

"That's her fourth, bless her," he murmured, as she took the last piece on the dish. "What time do you get dinner, my dear?"

He was about to go when two men came in. One of them was an American, and Johns recog-

nized him as a member of the New York police service whom he knew. He signalled to him, and they made their way to his table and sat down.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked.

"Brought the missis over for a holiday," Johns answered. "We're about half through. And you?"

"Oh, business. *We* don't get enough dollars for holidays in Europe."

"That so? Then I guess you'll be taking a passenger back with you—eh?"

"Dessay."

"What's new the other side? If you read the papers here you'd think America didn't exist 'cept Roosevelt and Taft."

"Nothing fresh when I left."

"Are you seeing the town? There's a healthy lot of monuments."

"No time. It's there and back with me, and the sooner I'm back the better it suits me this trip."

"That's a pity. There's Westminster Abbey now. It's impressive."

"Ah!"

"I've bought a photograph of it," Johns said, producing his purchase.

The detective and his friend looked at it with no more than a faint interest; and, as the conversation seemed to be languishing, Johns got up, saying:

"Well, I'll be moving. Pleased to meet you. So long."

"So long."

Johns turned away, and the detective, leaning toward his friend, said:

"That's Luke Johns, unofficial agent in New York. He and his wife work together doing society jobs. He's smart, but he's hell-fire hot. He's been over the edge more than once, *I* know; one of these times he'll get bagged."

Luke Johns reached the boarding-house as the bell was ringing for dinner. He said nothing to his wife about his interview with Fraser, and during the meal he talked mainly of their plans for Paris. When they had finished she suggested that he should take her to a music-hall, and they set off on foot down Gower Street to go to the Palace.

At a corner a man was selling newspapers. He was calling out "Society Suicide." Johns' face betrayed no sign of interest, but he bought a paper and read it as he walked along.

It was a paragraph on the front page which held his attention. He read it through, and then handed the paper to his wife. When she saw Fraser's name she started and looked at her husband with a keen, searching glance. He was busy lighting a cigar, and she read on to the end of the column without speaking. Then she folded up the newspaper and gave it back to him.

After a silence which lasted almost to the door of the music-hall she turned to him and said:

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him they would prosecute," he answered.

She understood. The case of Graham Toulon had been already in her mind.

It was nearly midnight when they returned to the boarding-house. On the hall table there was an envelope addressed to Luke Johns. It contained Porton's card, on which he had written: "I have called twice, trying to find you. Come to my office at ten to-morrow without fail."

Upstairs Mrs. Johns signed to her husband to bring the slate.

"What are you going to do?" she wrote.

"See Porton in the morning," he answered.

"And tell him—what?"

"It's up to him to do the telling. He thinks I didn't see Fraser."

"And then——?"

"If he left a letter giving the show away I cut my loss and get out. I put the necklace on the table and dodge the questions. Suppose he does say he gave it me on Sunday. I say he didn't, and he's not there to answer back."

"And if there's no letter, there's no evidence. Fraser took it and passed it on—and Lord knows who's got it now."

Mrs. Johns looked steadily at her husband. She was not worrying about morals; she was trying to find a loophole in his argument. Apparently she was satisfied; for after a minute she laid aside the slate and got up.

"We'd best turn in, Luke," she said. "It's late."

CHAPTER VI

THE next morning Luke Johns was in Lincoln's Inn Fields by ten o'clock, and was promptly shown into Mr. Porton's room.

"You've heard what's happened, I suppose," Porton said, without any preliminary greeting. "Did you get the necklace out of him in time?"

Johns sat down, assuming the air of an elderly person who thinks it necessary to give an undivided attention to the process. He was in no hurry to reply, but when he was comfortably settled he said:

"I've heard about Fraser."

It was not his policy to afford Porton an opportunity to ask questions which might be difficult to meet until he knew more; and he followed on quickly:

"What's been done?"

"Everything possible. But did you get the necklace? That's what I want to know."

Porton's insistence did not suit Johns at all. He saw that he was in the greatest danger, and his heart beat furiously as the possibilities rose before him. If he said "yes," the game was up, and the necklace must be handed over. But if he said "no" he was committing himself irretrievably. If Fraser had left a letter, the "no" could never be explained away; he could not plead now that he was doing the best for Fraser, or that he was play-

ing a hoax on Porton. No one would swallow that story, and he would stand to lose not only his fee but his reputation. They might even go to the length of arresting him on a charge of attempted theft. He would have given a thousand dollars to know whether Fraser had left a letter. His leading question, "What's been done?" upon which he had counted for an answer to guide him, had been turned aside, and he did not dare to repeat it. "Everything possible" might mean very little; it did not necessarily mean that Porton had searched Fraser's rooms.

What did seem clear was that Porton had not yet received a letter. Otherwise, he would scarcely have asked, "Did you get the necklace out of him in time?" He would know that he *had* got it—unless he was laying a trap for him.

All this passed through his mind in the fraction of a second. He knew that he must decide instantly on the course he meant to follow, for the slightest hesitation would make Porton suspicious. He slid his hand into his pocket and fingered the necklace. The feel of it stiffened his courage, and moistening his lips he said: "No; I didn't."

Porton flung his pencil on the table, crying furiously: "Then we've lost it. Didn't you see him yesterday? You left here to go and see him."

"No; I told you I was to see him in the afternoon. I 'phoned him up and he put me off. Said he wasn't ready to talk, and he'd ring me last night or this morning first thing. I told him I was

to meet you at twelve o'clock to-day, and he said that would be all right."

"Go on."

"Well, he didn't ring up last night, but I didn't fret, 'cause I thought it was sure. Then I got your telegram, and I thought p'r'aps he'd gone through to you; and this morning I read about it in the newspaper. I'm real upset about it, I am so."

"Confound it! Just when we were within an ace of getting it! I told my clients yesterday the thing was as good as settled."

Johns slipped in the question he was waiting to ask:

"Have his rooms been searched?"

"Rather. I read about it in the train, going home, and came straight back to town and went to Scotland Yard. Of course, they knew about the robbery, and when I told them Fraser was the man they took me along to Jermyn Street at once. I was there three hours, and we turned the place inside out."

"Find anything?"

"Nothing. Not a clue of any sort."

"No letters?"

"One."

Johns' heart bounded. Hardened as he was he could not control himself and his lips twitched with fear.

Had Porton been leading him on all the time?

"One?" he cried sharply.

"To his mother," Porton answered listlessly. "In the circumstances, I took the liberty of opening it and made a copy."

Johns breathed freely again. The danger was passing.

"What did he say?" he asked.

Porton threw a folded sheet of paper across the table, saying: "It's a confession, but that's all."

Johns took it up and read it.

"MY DARLING MOTHER:

"I have tried to keep my promise and let you have the money you want; but I have failed.

"I am not going to excuse myself for what I have done. I was tempted and I yielded; and you have nothing to reproach yourself with, for you would have been the last to approve.

"I cannot bear the disgrace and the knowledge that I have forever ruined the family name, and I am taking what seems to me the only possible course.

"Forgive me, darling mother, for bringing this upon you. The fault is mine alone, and I am paying for it willingly.

"Your loving son,

"LESLIE."

Luke Johns' spirits rose as he read it. It could scarcely have been more to his purpose if he had written it himself.

"That's plain," he said.

"Yes, plain enough," Porton growled. "But who's got the necklace?"

"Guess that's what you want to know," Johns could not resist saying.

"There's five hundred pounds for you if you can put your finger on him."

"Dessay. But I'm about used up. I don't know the crooks on this side."

"No. The police here will have to take it over, but it's a poor chance. He gave you no hint where it was?"

"He said a safe place. Seems to me, it was so safe he couldn't find it again."

"Yes, that's my idea. I was afraid from the moment you told me he'd parted with it. If we'd shadowed him we might have learnt something. There's no doubt he was in with a gang; and either it had been got rid of before you caught him, or they rounded on him, and refused to hand it over. Don't you think so?"

"It's likely."

"They used him and threw him over, I expect. They would, of course. And when he found he couldn't get the wherewithal to settle with us he made up his mind to end it. Not a bad judge, either, but he might have eased his conscience by giving us a hint where to look."

Johns seemed to have nothing more to say, and after a moment Porton put his hand on the bell, adding:

"I must give you a check, Mr. Johns. Sorry it won't be for the amount I thought of yesterday."

Johns smiled. He had a very pleasant smile when he was in a good humor.

A clerk came in and Porton said to him:

"Draw a check for twenty pounds to the order of Mr. Luke Johns and bring it in, please."

"When are you sailing?" he asked, turning to Johns.

"To-morrow," Johns answered. "We're going to Paris for a while, and then we'll catch a boat at Havre."

"O! You're returning by a French boat? I've never tried them."

"We came across in a White Star. Reckon one's as good as another."

"Yes; I've heard they do you very well on the Transatlantique boats."

There was a pause while Porton signed the check. Then he passed it across to Johns and got up, saying:

"There you are, Mr. Johns. I'm as sorry as you are that it isn't for five hundred, and I believe it might have been if we'd had Fraser shadowed. Still, there it is, and it can't be helped. But I'm afraid—I'm very much afraid—that we shall never see that necklace again."

Johns withdrew his hand from his pocket and took the check, saying in his most strident American tone: "W-e-ll, no. I guess you never will."

THE END

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